



Looking to food sovereignty movements for post-growth theory

Antonio Roman-Alcalá

abstract

This paper analyzes ‘food sovereignty’ and the movements that work for it at local, national, and supranational levels and at the intersection of markets, governments, and civil society. The goal is to illuminate potential aspects of post-growth socio-ecological systems management regimes. These aspects include: (a) socially and ecologically embedded and politically engaged market activity, as evidenced by ‘peasant’ modes of food production and distribution; (b) deliberative and ‘agonistic’ democratic models for policy construction, as evidenced by internal organizational processes within the transnational food sovereignty network La Vía Campesina; and (c) multi-sited ‘relational’ forms of understanding and institutionalizing sovereignty, as evidenced by the complex of institutions engaged by food sovereignty movements and the ways that ‘power over’ aspects of classical sovereignty are combined with more ‘power with’ and ‘power to’ conceptions emergent in food sovereignty. Although this case relates fundamentally to issues of food and farming, the resulting aspects may be applicable to other realms of post-growth economic regimes. Fundamentally, it is argued that politically engaged movements of producers, whose productive surpluses are invested into non-growth ends with support of governments, will construct post-growth economies.

Introduction

We need to replace capitalism with a new system that seeks harmony between humans and nature and not an endless growth model that the capitalist system promotes in order to make more and more profit. (Vía Campesina, 2014)

How social movements relate to social theories has long been a concern for activists, scholars, and activist-scholars alike. It is increasingly accepted that theory and action are dialectically intertwined, and that movements can

themselves theorize, while theory can but is not guaranteed to aid movements (Edelman, 2009). 'Movement-centered' theory has brought to the forefront knowledges produced by the social actors themselves, outside of and in correspondence with the academy (Bevington and Dixon, 2005). In the search for post-growth futures, the importance of both theory *and* action (converting theory to action and subjecting action to critical-theoretical scrutiny) must be emphasized.

Some scholars have advanced a 'food utopias' framework to analyze how utopian social action informs and precipitates developments in food systems (Stock et al., 2015). Food Sovereignty Movements (FSMs) are a prime example of such action. 'Food Sovereignty' is a concept popularized by La Vía Campesina, a transnational social movement organization formed in 1993, comprising small-scale food producers, farm laborers, fisher people and indigenous peoples. The Vía Campesina coalition claims to represent at least 200 million people through respective national and regional member organizations and sub-coalitions that are mainly agrarian in origins and focus (Torres and Rosset, 2010; Desmarais, 2008). As a coalition, Vía Campesina has focused on confronting international bodies that structure the global food system, introducing food sovereignty as a counterpoint to neoliberal agricultural and trade policies that, it argues, disempower farmers and rural communities.

As such, Vía Campesina has opposed the free trade agreements, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and neoliberal 'Washington Consensus' policies through advocacy, protest, and communications strategies. Dramatically, a South Korean Vía Campesina member committed suicide during protests outside the 2003 Cancun round of WTO talks, while carrying a sign stating 'WTO Kills Farmers'. Vía Campesina has also engaged diverse United Nations agencies to incorporate a human rights perspective into issues of food, agriculture, and trade policy. All this engagement has been grounded in the coalition's proposed policy alternative: that of 'food sovereignty'. Though Vía Campesina is not the only group to mobilize food sovereignty, it is by far emblematic of the concept.

Most generally, food sovereignty is construed to mean 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' (Nyéléni, 2007: 1). Crucially, food sovereignty 'prioritizes local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal-fishing, pastoralist-led grazing' (*ibid.*). The concept of a 'peasant' form of production counterpoised against globalized capitalist agriculture thus undergirds food sovereignty.

Like ‘freedom’ or ‘civil rights’, food sovereignty is a contested, evolving, multi-faceted concept, and a goal rather than a fully achieved reality. Yet it exists to degrees, in different places; even if it cannot be fully ensured, it can be supported and advanced. FSMs have thus instigated national policies for ‘food sovereignty’ in at least six countries (Claeys, 2014: 47). In 2013, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations formally agreed to partner with *Vía Campesina* to improve the status of small farmers via food sovereignty; in 2015 the United Nations officially recognized the ‘rights of peasants’. In this and other examples, *Vía Campesina* has succeeded in moving institutions of global food systems governance towards food sovereignty (Brem-Wilson, 2015).

One important aspect of *Vía Campesina* is its intention to represent food producers directly: the cadre and leadership of the *Vía Campesina* coalition are farmers rather than professional activists.¹ In bringing together farmers from around the globe, and attempting to fashion a unified position and identity as a coalition, *Vía Campesina* has settled on a collective identity as ‘peasants’ (*Vía Campesina* translates as ‘the peasant way’). Peasants offer an analytical challenge, because they vary so widely as a category, and their relationship to capitalism and economic development has been debated politically and academically for over a century (e.g. Bernstein, 2009; Edelman, 2013). Here, rather than seek to resolve these debates, I use the descriptor ‘peasant’ to denote small-scale, diversified, and family farm-based food producers, with an emphasis on the descriptor as a political (self-) construction (similar to how *Vía Campesina* itself mobilizes the term). Just as food sovereignty exists to degrees, ‘peasants’ vary in matching any narrow analytical depiction. While painting with a necessarily broad brush, I will still attempt to address nuances in the composition and ostensibly progressive role of peasantries.

A common refrain from food sovereignty critics is that peasants cannot ‘feed the world’. Yet global institutions and assessments have found that peasants (variously described as smallholders, family farmers, small-scale farmers, and pastoralists) already produce more than half the world’s food and can be more productive than large-scale industrial, corporate farms (FAO, 2014: vi; Graeub et al., 2015; IFAD, 2013; HLPE, 2013: 26).² Only about 12% of foods are exported

1 However, the line between farmers and activist professionals is fuzzy, and agrarian activists can lose their credibility as farmers insofar as they end up traveling to work off the farm (Borras and Edelman, 2016: 89).

2 Estimates include 80% (FAO, 2014), or ‘over 80 per cent of the food consumed in a large part of the developing world’ (IFAD 2013: 6). It is important to note that each study uses particular metrics of what and whom it measures (e.g. based on *inter alia* farm size, family ownership structure, labor source), using statistical data the

across national borders, which means that globalized food systems are the *exception* rather than the rule for how human beings obtain their food (Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld, 2012: 15-16).³ Peasant producers have a long history, and remain the producers of the bulk of the world's food, contradicting the conventional wisdom that humanity survives only because of industrial and globalized agriculture.⁴

The peasants represented by *Vía Campesina* are often marginalized socially, economically, and politically (IFAD, 2013: 9), but they are far from 'marginal' in terms of impact on the global food system. To ignore their contribution to development politics, agricultural policy, and global economics is to misunderstand the world's true food production base, and to overlook one of its largest contemporary social movements. Thus, this paper takes the historic role of peasantries seriously, considering their lifeways and forms of political organization as valuable and worthy objects of study. It uses the example of FSMs (particularly *Vía Campesina*), the food producers they represent⁵, and the concept of food sovereignty itself, in order to elaborate how post-growth economies might be envisioned and constructed.

The ethics of ecological production, egalitarianism, and democratic control that underpin food sovereignty are common to much of the post-growth literature. This literature promotes a 'steady state economy' of ecological production (Daly, 1973), an egalitarian redistribution of wealth within and between countries (Paris Declaration, 2008), and a qualitatively different idea of development made possible through strengthening democracy (Gudynas, 2013)⁶. Another

availability of which varies country to country. These sorts of estimates are always educated guesses.

- 3 Unfortunately, these statistics leave unclear the *character* of production that goes into local or international markets: *some* peasant farms *do* produce for export, while *some* industrial capitalist farms *do* produce for local consumption. While the former occurs regularly in production of colonial crops like coffee and chocolate, these are exceptional cases for contemporary peasant agriculture.
- 4 A related myth is the unsubstantiated allegation that peasant production is more likely to lead to famine, in times of drought, etc. On the contrary, Davis (2000) provides historical evidence that famines have been created and exacerbated by colonial relations, while pre-colonial peasant-based agricultural states like China and India implemented effective measures for internally redistributing surpluses in times of localized scarcity.
- 5 See Borrás' (2010) excellent analysis of representation within transnational agrarian movements, and further comments by Robbins (2015: 453) on how representation is rarely 'full' or static.
- 6 Democratic control, rather than simply a matter of elections, entails the 'empowered inclusion of those affected in collective decisions and actions' (Warren, 2004: 333).

proposition shared by the post-growth literature and the food sovereignty movement is that capitalism is at the root of ecological crises: the problems of destructive growth are rooted in tendencies of capitalist firms and capitalist state forms (Foster and Magdoff, 2011). Confronting growth means confronting capitalism. But with what?

Peasantries have extensive pasts as agents of non-growth economies, and many actively continue to struggle to maintain their non-capitalist way of life (van der Ploeg, 2013: 14-16 and *passim*), increasingly under the banner of food sovereignty. By struggling against capitalist markets (and dominant players in them), and constructing alternative markets based on food sovereignty principles, FSMs and the peasants who compose them challenge the notion that capitalism is the only or even the dominant form for food production or agricultural markets.

Analysis of FSM actions thus provides hints for how to address general questions of post-growth economics. Hence, we can ask questions such as: Who are the agents and units of post-growth production? What are the methods of that production? What characterizes its governance structures and market forms? This paper argues that post-growth economies would benefit from practical and theoretical elaboration of the following three elements of food sovereignty: (1) socially and ecologically embedded and politically engaged market activity, (2) deliberative and ‘agonistic’ democratic models for constructing rules and policies, and (3) multi-sited ‘relational’ ways of conceiving sovereignty.⁷ Before defining and developing these three aspects, the next section clarifies the conceptual and historical bases necessary for such analysis. The concluding section reiterates the potentials and challenges for design of post-growth systems, based on the case of FSMs.

FSMs and the economic/cultural/political construction of ‘regimes’

Economics, culture, and the politics of human organization are inseparable. Economic organization is subject to a wide variety of decision-making institutions and conditioned by shifting norms and values (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992). All forms of human organization (including family and community) condition life economically, culturally and politically, even if they are not ‘official’ venues of politics. Over the past few decades, for-profit transnational

7 Even if FSMs have not explicitly proposed such elements as guides for post-growth economic organization, these can nonetheless form a theoretical basis for engagement with many areas of post-growth concern (such as transportation, energy, clothing, housing).

corporations (TNCs) have become key organizations constitutive of the growth economy. Political-economic structures composed of a complex of these institutions and organizations can at times become cohesive and stable enough to be considered a 'regime'. Harriet Friedmann (1993: 30) first developed the concept of the 'food regime' as a 'rule-governed structure of production and consumption of food on a world scale'. McMichael (2013) suggests that the current global food economy operates under a 'corporate food regime' dominated by TNCs and economic growth-focused state actors and characterized by industrial capitalist agriculture with 'accelerating biophysical contradictions' (Weis, 2010). Growth regimes of this kind also exist in sectors other than food production, such as mining, energy, transport or consumer goods.

To achieve sustainable food economies, new forms of social power over food systems and ideally, a new regime are needed. These new forms will involve governments (to regulate and set rule-based parameters to economic organization), market actors (to implement and refine non-harmful economic processes) and civil society (to set agendas, to engage with and hold governments and market actors accountable). But what potential is there for change through these sectors? Poulantzas (1978) and Fox (1993), in different ways, argue that most capitalist nation-states prioritize continued capital accumulation, but balance the worst outcomes of this accumulation against the need for continuing governance legitimacy. State theorists have claimed relatedly that imperatives of state revenue and political stability influence state actors to support general economic growth (Block, 1977). It has long been noted that under competitive capitalist circumstances, businesses tend to innovate, grow, or risk failure (e.g. Schumpeter, 1943). At the same time, businesses and states are not uniform. Not all actors in markets are equally 'capitalist' (Gibson-Graham, 2006), and state actors do not always prioritize economic growth over other interests, including ecological ones (Barry and Eckersley, 2005). Civil society influences state actors and shapes state forms, while states, in turn, shape the composition and disposition of civil society. Furthermore, local normative values and social structures intersect with ostensibly universal capitalist logics, affecting how market agents act, how states regulate them, and the interactive process between states, markets, and civil society that determines outcomes (Tsing, 2005).

FSMs consist of small, family, and collective farmers, nongovernmental organizations, informal community groups, communities of fisher people and nomadic pastoralists, political advocacy and direct action groups and networks, seed sharing networks, market networks, and so on. This assemblage is indicative of the fact that 'politics', in the sense of regime formation, operates through production, markets, governments, *and* the prefigurative creation of alternatives in an interactive, hybridizing, and chaotic fashion. No sector (market,

state, civil society) is ideal in terms of guaranteeing outcomes, and any categorical description of any sector is likely to be inaccurate, since conditions vary greatly across the planet. As mentioned, states and markets are not uniform, and neither is 'civil society': studies on 'uncivil' society have challenged views of civil society as uniformly beneficent (e.g. Monga, 2009). Individual intention can impact all sorts of institutions and the ways they interact. These interactions in turn (re)compose the sectors themselves and their organization. Progress towards food sovereignty can thus emerge in each sector and through linkages made between them, and by creating, contesting, or repairing institutions in any sector.

FSMs work in these ways in many forms, at multiple scales, and based largely on longstanding social-agricultural traditions, towards a regime instituted on food sovereignty's three central ethics. FSMs align local and regional markets, societal values, state and interstate policies, and their own internal organization with these ethics, through six principles developed at the international Nyéléni gathering in 2007. According to these principles, food sovereignty: (1) focuses on food for people (not profit), (2) values food providers, (3) localizes food systems, (4) puts control locally, (5) builds knowledge and skills, and (6) works with nature (Nyéléni, 2007). Taken together these principles can be seen in Polanyi's (1944) terms to promote markets that remain 'embedded' in social and ecological relations.

FSMs call for both *change within* and *the replacement of* capitalism. This is important to post-growth theory, which in its most radical forms seems to imply that capitalist markets and states must be abandoned to achieve post-growth economies. Certainly, modern ecological crises indicate the need to challenge capitalist accumulation and nation states that unduly orient themselves towards that accumulation. Yet in the short term, barring catastrophic disruptions, the end of pro-growth structures (capital and state) remains unlikely. Using the example of FSMs, I argue that it is possible to operate in the service of creating better environmental governance and non-growth forms of economy (reformism), while advocating the replacement of capitalism (radicalism). In fact, this economic-political strategy is what most immediately defines and creates a post-growth economy, as current practices and organizational forms provide the testing grounds for post-growth structures. In the area of food, the key practice to start with, obviously, is food production; hence, the next section introduces the

‘peasant’ mode of agricultural production rooted in agroecology⁸ as the basis for non-growth food production.

Peasant production and agroecology

Peasant modes of production predate industrial agriculture and continue alongside it. These modes of production, often tied to ethnic/cultural traditions, underpin the food sovereignty project, and can be models for embedded, post-growth economies. It is often assumed that peasants produce primarily for subsistence while capitalists produce for markets, but in fact peasants often produce for markets as well.⁹ By seeking markets as means for reproductive livelihood rather than expansion, and by reinvesting surpluses from production into the natural capital of functional agroecosystems (via agroecology), peasant production offers an alternative to growth-driven agriculture. Though there are important questions about how often and to what extent family and small farmers match an idealized ‘peasant mode of production’, empirical evidence from the extensive peasant studies literature shows that this mode exists and differs substantively from the industrial capitalist mode of production.¹⁰

8 ‘Agroecology’ is a science, farming practice, and social movement rooted in the use of ecological processes for more productive and sustainable agricultures, and based on traditional farmer and ecological knowledges (Altieri, 1995; Holt-Giménez and Altieri, 2013). Concretely, agroecological techniques include biological rather than chemical control of pests and disease; farm-made fertility rather than purchased chemical fertilizer inputs; agrobiodiversity rather than monocultural production; nutrient cycling; crop rotation; diversity and integration of farm elements; soil building through nitrogen-fixing plants and composting. These elements look different depending on where they are practiced, but examples abound of their use and success (e.g. Altieri et al., 2012; Oakland Institute, 2015; Pretty et al., 2006) and high-level experts consider agroecology a viable form of agricultural knowledge, science, and technological development (De Schutter, 2010; IAASTD, 2009).

9 This links to FSMs’ contentions that peasants *can* feed the world if supported by governments and when using agroecology. Though the right to subsistence is at its core, international assessments (e.g. FAO, 2014; HLPE, 2013; IFAD 2013) consider agroecological peasant production viable precisely because it is seen as able to produce livelihoods and surpluses while manifesting values of ecology.

10 Clearly, peasant production is an ‘ideal type’, and both scholarly depictions and self-descriptions can purposefully or inadvertently downplay variation. Instead of assuming that any peasant/family farm acts like this ideal, ‘the full complex of characteristics of local production sites must be investigated to gauge whether farms cohere to the food sovereignty paradigm’ (Roman-Alcalá, 2014: 17). Robbins’ (2015) helpful typology includes characteristics of scale (in terms of farm size and distribution reach), methods (from agroecological to industrial), and character (from peasant to capitalist). For any point defining pro-food sovereignty production, there are farms that will follow more closely in some areas than others. Peasants

To help define what peasant production is and does in this section, I rely on empirical and theoretical research by Robert Netting, an anthropologist, and Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, a rural sociologist, whose work builds on the Russian agronomist Alexander Chayanov. Their studies include details about many farming communities, and certain generalizations/theories made from these details. As the head of the Russian agronomic research unit that analyzed turn of the 20th century rural farming communities, Chayanov utilized historic demographic and production data and interviews with farmers to determine their logics of farm and economic organization. He described these as distinctly non-capitalist (Thorner, 1988). Chayanov's contention was that farms that did not pay land rent or hire wage labor based their operational choices on various 'balances' rather than profit maximization. The economic calculus of such a peasant farm is structured to *reproduce* the farm through an overall 'labor product', rather than to *grow* through 'profit'. Chayanov's 'balances' (like the balance a farm family finds between desired 'utility' and the 'drudgery' needed to achieve it) are concepts that help explain how this calculus emerges (van der Ploeg, 2013). Rather than elaborate the many balances, the important takeaway from Chayanovian thinking is that family labor-based farms do not operate by the same logic as capitalist ones, because factors of production (labor, land, inputs) are less commoditized.

Netting (1993) and van der Ploeg (2009; 2013) note the persistence of peasant production systems, varying and changing over time, but generally resulting in increased (labor) intensiveness, farm productivity, and ecological sustainability but not farm size. These systems have contributed to local and national food security, viable rural livelihoods, cultural reproduction, and biodiverse landscapes despite the spread of politically dominant capitalist markets, institutions, and actors.¹¹ The demise of peasantries was predicted by Lenin and many other Marxist theorists (see Bernstein, 2009), but has yet to occur, indicating that capitalism has less decisive structuring force than is often supposed. Marxist

sometimes seek export markets, hire wage labor, or use chemical inputs, improved (even biotechnological) seed, and machinery when accessible (Agarwal, 2014; Burnett and Murphy, 2014; Jansen, 2015). The descriptive factors used here are not 'make or break' and are better conceived as *constituents* of peasant production, which operates on a spectrum.

- 11 Examples of existing, persistent peasant production are found around the world (FS, 2014). Netting (1993) offers many cases of peasantries that avoid growth, including Swiss alpine peasant villages that developed social and economic mechanisms to maintain (demographic) stability in a highly adverse environment for millennia – a showcase of steady-state economics. Netting and Ploeg base their findings and theoretical constructs on over 30 years (each) of peasant community fieldwork and statistical analysis in 'developed' and 'developing' countries, including Nigeria, Switzerland, Italy, Colombia, Japan, Netherlands, Guinea Bissau, Ghana, Peru, Ivory Coast, Spain, Portugal, Mexico, Kenya, and the United Kingdom.

agrarian theory often predicts that peasants will exploit each other (by becoming buyers of labor power), become class differentiated, and pursue narrow and parochial politics (*ibid.*). This has led scholars to dismiss advocacy for peasant production as a viable alternative to capitalism (e.g. Bernstein, 2014). While examples of intra-peasantry class conflict and peasant-driven ‘capitalism from below’ (Jansen, 2015: 218) can indeed be found, so can counterexamples of peasant cooperation and anti-capitalism. Again, peasants may not always match the peasant production ideal, but certainly many do.¹²

Peasant farms are not isolated from capitalist influence, but they exhibit economic, cultural, and political mechanisms capable of subverting it. Chayanov’s balances are *economic* mechanisms. *Cultural* values, often called ‘moral economies’, are another aspect, and include ideologies and practices that encourage intra-community redistribution (Scott, 1976). Moving up from the farm or community level, FSMs are a *political* mechanism to protect peasants (and their ways of producing) against incursions from capitalist agriculture, reiterating the value of their lives and production not for growth but for feeding people. Peasants persist through various struggles, linked by social and political and not simply economic interests.

According to van der Ploeg (2013 *passim*), peasants endeavour to increase their autonomy, primarily by distancing from upstream input markets (for pesticides, herbicides, synthetic fertilizers, indebting machinery), but also from downstream markets increasingly controlled by TNCs. One way peasants do this is through (*ibid.*: 48-49) ‘coproduction’ of this autonomy with nature: farmers seek to increase the productive base of their (often limited) resource holdings by increasing their ecological capital rather than replacing such capital’s role in production with synthetic or purchased inputs. This is why agroecology is promoted heavily by FSMs: agroecological development is both *a target of investment* and *a source* of peasant (non-commodity) capital. Improving the farm’s ability to produce in a manner that can sustain the farm family’s reproduction is the prime target of surplus investment. Peasant communities also often pursue forms of cooperation in order to ‘scale up’ autonomy beyond the farm level (van der Ploeg, 2010: 12), such as the *subak* irrigation societies that enable families to

12 Still, existing peasant (class) variability poses difficult political questions to food sovereignty, such as how to align the interests of (landless) laborers with (small) landholders; how to deal with gender inequalities that are prevalent within some peasant communities; and what policies could support peasant producers, if they vary in farm size, character, and so on.

cultivate rice terraces in Bali (Netting, 1993: 179) or by developing new ‘nested markets’ for their products (van der Ploeg et al., 2012).¹³

Nested markets are ‘nested’ ‘in normative frameworks (and associated forms of governance) which are rooted in the social movements, institutional frameworks and/or policy programmes out of which they emerge. In other words they are not anonymous markets’ (*ibid.*: 139). Peasants create nested market networks to revalorize farming ‘re-embedded’ in local ecological and social contexts; these include shorter-circuit circulation of products but also peasant engagement in fair trade networks (Campbell, 2009; McNair and Friedmann, 2008; van der Ploeg et al., 2012; Raynolds, 2000). FSMs push states to provide markets through government procurement at public institutions such as schools, as well as for land redistribution and support for agroecology (as seen in Brazil; Chmielewska and Souza, 2010; Petersen et al., 2013). Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes are another form of urban-rural market connection founded more on a (social) ‘coproduction’ ideal than competitive price making (Watson and Böhm, 2014; Ostrom, 2007). Values-based certification schemes for products consumed locally have combined market-serving production with other food sovereignty goals, such as protection of biodiversity and cultural sustainability (Da Vià, 2012). These local projects have also relied upon trans-local solidarity through collaboration with a network of regional seed sharing organizations formed across Europe to protect the right to share locally developed seeds, against impositions of government regulations (*ibid.*). The ‘Potato Park’ of the Andes mountain region of South America shows how indigenous communities pursue food sovereignty goals (in this case, the preservation of agro-biogenetic diversity in potatoes and other locally developed crops) through markets, nongovernmental organizations, political movements, and governments at various levels from local to global (Iles and Montenegro de Wit, 2015).

These examples show how FSMs have worked at regional, national, international, discursive, and cultural levels to challenge growth in capitalist agriculture and support their own alternative modes of production, with nested local, regional, and international markets operating alongside FSMs’ more political pursuits. This work has contributed to ‘social learning’ about the challenges and opportunities of squaring ecological and social goals with the economic structures that exist at present. Social learning processes have been identified as crucial elements in the advancing transitions to sustainability (Wals, 2007).

13 No doubt, peasants also use monetary surpluses to buy cell phones, televisions, and other modern conveniences – which illustrates some of the more contradictory aspects of the peasant/growth nexus. How to address food producers’ desires for advanced technologies and infrastructures associated with macroeconomic growth is a question seldom considered by FSMs or food sovereignty’s academic advocates.

Instead of assuming that peasant production alone will subvert capitalist, growth-centered, unjust governance, FSMs have utilized multiple forms of organizing (direct action, policy advocacy, protest, media production, education), hybridizing a multiplicity of theories of change and venues of action into a common movement (see Borras et al., 2008). Though there are problems within this movement, including questions about the authenticity of representation of the world's peasants by *Vía Campesina* (Borras, 2010: 782), it seeks solutions beyond simply naïve localism. When FSMs assert their ability to feed the world, this presumes that their rights to productive resources are protected, their modes of production respected and supported by governments, and their communities politically empowered in relation to state and corporate actors. In advocating more local control, FSMs seek to alter food systems in ways that privilege the transformative potential of relocalized political control, but do not assume that food systems can be governed at the local level alone.

FSMs demand an ecological economy focused at the local level, egalitarian resource allocation and use, and democratic forms of decision-making (Nyéléni, 2007). The *result* of peasant production is often claimed by food sovereignty proponents to be the same: an egalitarian, ecological and democratic economy. Even if industrial agriculture causes major problems in ecology, democracy, and equality, this does not mean that peasant production automatically results in the opposite. While values of (agro)ecology can be found in much peasant production, egalitarianism and democracy are more constrained; in fact, ethnic, gender, and generational inequalities at household and community levels have long been present in many peasant communities. Still, the combination of economic factors of the family farm unit, community 'moral economies', and reflexive political resistance including food sovereignty as a political project combine to make non-growth agroecological food production possible (Molina, 2013). Insofar as food sovereignty offers a different model of agricultural production that connects with transformative political aspirations such as 'an end to violence against women' and 'radical egalitarianism' (Patel, 2009: 670), it informs how post-growth economics will be generated: by classes of producers who are structurally distanced from, if not opposed to, growth-as-goal, and are culturally/politically determined to produce on another logic.

Market activity that (re)distributes surpluses to social needs and spreads social and ecological innovations contributes to human development without compounding growth. When accompanied by strong social movements capable of shifting policies, political debates, and cultural values, these efforts may even redefine 'growth'. What peasant production shows is that the reinvestment of surplus need not go to 'growth' in the capitalist sense, when economic, cultural, and political forces allow or promote alternative logics of distribution of this

surplus. In this way, peasants offer promising lessons for post-growth logics of production.

Deliberative and ‘agonistic’ democratic models for rule construction

In leveraging the term ‘democracy’, it is necessary to clarify its meaning. The current conjuncture in many countries is one of democracy corrupted by everyday ‘violations of the democratic norm of inclusion’ (Warren, 2004: 328). It is this inclusivity, particularly of those most marginalized by existing systems but also of all non-elite actors, that is demanded in democracy. FSMs (among other social movements) contend that voices in society concerned about capitalist growth are consistently left or forced out of decision making over important socially structuring institutions, as in the boardrooms of firms and offices of elected officials. Further, the ‘empowered’ component means that inclusion (like ‘participation’ in development projects) must be effective in working towards ends. Having a ‘seat at the table’ is not the same as deciding what gets eaten.

Many academic thinkers have joined such social movements in promoting the hope that deepening democracy, by improving inclusion, can lessen corruption and elite capture and thus subvert societal tendencies towards ecologically harmful growth. Many have promoted ‘deliberative’ face-to-face democracy as a more participatory form of decision-making to be applied in political and economic worlds (e.g. Dryzek and Stevenson, 2011). Noorgard (1994) has argued that improvement of social-natural ‘co-evolutionary’ processes requires values-explicit political deliberation that can supersede representational, ostensibly ‘rationalized’ decision-making structures that currently promote economic growth. Some theorists combine the localist impulse with the democratic one, resulting in anarchist/green politics that emphasize decentralization towards an ideal of bioregional human organization (Biehl, 1997; Davidson, 2009). Prugh et al. (2000) agreed with such theorists that indeed, a localized ‘strong’ democracy is needed to achieve global sustainability.

Looking over this canon, common threads include democratic forms that combine deliberation, empowered inclusion, iterative social learning and a bias towards the local. Food policy councils are examples of these common threads. Food policy councils are deliberative spaces, set up at municipal level, which gather citizen voices representing various sectors in the food system (e.g. low income consumers, urban farmers, food banks, public health departments, etc.). Such councils work towards changing policy, supporting local initiatives, and strengthening connections between sectors and elements within the local system (e.g. Harper et al., 2009). The councils also provide spaces of connection to other

levels of political organization (the California Food Policy Council, for example, brings together dozens of local food policy councils in order to tackle similar issues at the state level¹⁴). As noted in the previous section, the local level cannot in and of itself create food sovereignty or counter endless growth. Thus, deepened democracy must be pursued at multiple levels.

Vía Campesina gives us hints to how this multi-level approach might work (Menser, 2008). FSM scholars Martínez-Torres and Rosset (2014: 979) have described how Vía Campesina has been ‘sustained and shaped’ by internal dialogues that happen ‘on multiple levels’ among its diverse, global membership. Within their component organizations and in international gatherings, Vía Campesina members raise and hash out issues such as the cultural/political meaning of land, the importance of gender in agrarian issues (and the need to address patriarchy both within and outside FSMs), and the use of ‘human rights’ norms and instruments to protect peasants. Amidst their diversity, the shared experience of those members who have been ‘left out by the dominant monoculture of ideas’ has led to the development of concepts like food sovereignty and ‘social methodologies’ for challenging the corporate food regime (*ibid.*). More detailed information on these deliberations can be found in Rosset (2013) on land, Desmarais (2004) on gender, and Suárez (2013) on rights, but the operative point is that Vía Campesina effectively unites a diversity of non-elite actors confronting widely varying conditions, but whose interests and values are potentially in conflict. Vía Campesina has maintained a ‘big tent’ of ‘locals’ who have pursued mutual social learning and (internal) rule-making through multilevel processes of inclusive deliberation.

Importantly, ‘Vía Campesina rejects [the] kind of process where they would be forced to find a mid-point with completely unacceptable positions’ that is common in so-called ‘multi-stakeholder’ processes where non-elite actors engage powerful elites (Martínez-Torres and Rosset, 2014: 982). Deliberative dialogue functions best to ‘collectively construct... understanding and positions’ rather than to achieve compromise among unequal actors (*ibid.*). Even among pre-existing allies, deliberation does not necessarily require eventual consensus, nor is consensus a likely outcome in many circumstances. Some social antagonisms are so entrenched in certain social positions, cultures, and interests that they simply may not be resolvable. Mouffe (2011) has proposed an ‘agonistic’ model of deliberative democracy opposed to more liberal versions of deliberative democracy that emphasize the importance of reaching a ‘rational’ consensus. Mouffe opposes obliterating difference simply to achieve consensus, viewing difference as strengthening the quality of ‘agonistic’ dialogues. Similarly, Vía

14 See <http://www.rootsofchange.org/content/about-cafpc>.

Campesina's dialogues treat positions not as potentially universal truths that must battle each other for dominance but as potentially useful relative truths that should be aired and discussed in order to strengthen movement towards agreed upon underlying values. For example, Vía Campesina's 'peasant'-centered promotion of agrarian reform was challenged by indigenous members who saw land as culturally-integrated and not just a means for production, and by nomadic pastoralists, whose use rights could not be encompassed within a land reform frame (Rosset, 2013). While differences and debates are appreciated, major 'conflicts ... are typically tabled for later consideration when tensions have abated' (Martínez-Torres and Rosset, 2014: 980). Some differences present continual challenges not easily resolvable within FSMs, such as the issue of whether food sovereignty is best advanced through top-down or bottom-up means (Claeys, 2014). Still, differences do not *necessarily* prevent unity or action.

In similar fashion, multiple and overlapping processes of democratic dialogue might illuminate the problems of growth and potential solutions and enhance the ability of intersecting institutions of society to formulate, enact, and vet these solutions. However, *deliberation is no panacea*, and deliberative processes themselves are no guarantee of achieving food sovereignty or counter-growth outcomes. In fact, deliberative processes can compound pre-existing social inequalities if they lack safeguards to ensure that relevant parties are authentically included and heard, and that no party holds undue influence.¹⁵ Introducing deliberation into a community with previously existing power inequalities (as in so many well-intentioned but failed 'participatory' development projects¹⁶) can merely amplify those inequalities. When deliberation results in decisions that structure action, it creates winners and losers. Currently, peasants are 'neglected' in policy-making (IFAD, 2013: 6). Hence, crucial preconditions to *any* functional deliberative democratic approach must include attention to marginalization within particular societal and decision-making contexts and means must be developed that can address this inequity.

This issue of deliberation points to another challenge to deliberation as a tool of post-growth governance. Even if Vía Campesina's dialogues started from a place of united opposition to the corporate food regime, and even if it has elaborated a more comprehensive vision for that opposition, these activities have not always led to agreed-upon, comprehensive, and nuanced policy recommendations that

15 FSMs are skeptical of the inclusion of TNCs in 'multi-stakeholder' processes, or the direction of those processes by economically powerful countries, the assumption being that their participation will likely only reproduce TNCs' existing power (Via Campesina, 2011).

16 See Mansuri and Rao (2013).

are appropriate to all participants and their relevant circumstances. That is, even with authentic empowered inclusion, a prioritization among socially agreed upon goals like food sovereignty's three ethics applied to both producers *and* consumers might still remain difficult due to the on-the-ground contradictions between their concurrent actualization (Agarwal, 2014; and see Woodhouse, 2010, who questions whether small-scale farming can satisfy producer *and* consumer interests, since prices and wages are tied to relative labor productivity). This combination of challenges shows the difficulty of translating agreed-upon principles and values into concrete, implementable strategies and policies. Furthermore, the 'deeper' the democracy, and the more inclusive it is, the more there will be trade-offs between comprehensiveness of inclusion and efficiency in decision-making. While Mouffe argues that differences are key to a healthy democratic process, her own model makes it unlikely that groups will find easy agreement about the relative importance of 'moving forward' on decisions (into policy and implementation), versus the more knowledge- and values-oriented process of 'agnostic deliberation' itself.

Forms of sovereignty for a post-growth regime?

Mouffe's agonistic model links well to new visions of 'sovereignty' indicated by FSMs. Classical definitions of sovereignty have centered on nation-states. More generally, sovereignty entails a 'sovereign' unit that holds (internal and external) legitimacy, makes rules which codify the sovereign 'will', and has the capacity to enact that policy within a specified territory. Historically, sovereignty has relied on 'over' and 'against' power, in that the sovereign's power was 'over' the collective of individuals gathered within its territory, and 'against' the sovereignty of other sovereigns. This means that states (the main spaces for sovereignty) maintain power over the individuals within them, and do not compete with other sovereignties within their territories. FSM members have argued that states (by themselves) are not effective guarantors of food sovereignty, especially because the 'role of state institutions is decreasing in importance, with private institutions taking their place' (Purwanto, 2013: 3). Purwanto, an Indonesian peasant member of *Vía Campesina*, argues that FSMs must 'link their demands through actions at the local, national and global level, challenging power at each level' (*ibid.*: 9). But by 'blowing apart' the centrality of states in ordering food systems, food sovereignty 'displaces one sovereign, but remains silent about the others' (Patel, 2009: 668). If states fail to act as growth-inhibiting or food sovereignty-promoting institutions, and large TNCs even less so, where and how should sovereignty be sited? Can 'local communities' themselves be relied upon to advance alternatives to growth?

FSMs' multi-sited strategies for food sovereignty map onto pre-existing shifts in states and sovereignty, but FSMs do not uniformly push for a dismissal of state sovereignty (and the reinstatement of sovereignty to the local/community level). Rather, sovereignty is dispersed to all centers of legitimate power capable of crafting rules and implementing them in favor of food sovereignty. FSMs certainly desire some 'over and against' institutions capable of rolling back corporate power. Such institutions would be crucial to overcoming capitalist growth more generally. However, they construct sovereignty in a different way. In this project, the state can be included, but in a facilitative rather than commanding role. An example of this is Venezuela's food sovereignty 'experiment' researched by Schiavoni (2015). In this case, local communities of food producers were organized into self-managed '*comunas*' and supported in material ways by the state, in a collaborative (albeit contentious) process of 'co-responsibility' for reducing dependence on imported foods nationally, and improving local food security, resource equity, and empowered inclusionary democracy. Schiavoni's research shows that state and community sovereignties, while competing in many ways, can also be co-constructed.

Similarly, 'local' sovereignties can be integrated into trans-local and supranational institutions, like the governance of global food policy through the United Nations' Committee on World Food Security and its 'Civil Society Mechanism' (CSM). After years of pressure from civil society and the shock of the 2007 global food crisis, the Committee on World Food Security was structurally reformed to empower civil society voices in its processes, through the CSM. This restructuring has enabled FSM input into new supranational land governance norms: an apparent success for food sovereignty, but perhaps too early to tell how effective it will be (Brem-Wilson, 2015).¹⁷ The CSM process of uniting non-elite actors in global processes, like *Vía Campesina*'s dialogues, contributes to social learning. However, the inclusion of the most-marginalized actors relevant to debated issues (like land tenure) has been difficult in the CSM, for reasons of distance, time, and capacity (Schiavoni and Mulvaney, 2014: 26). The principle of including marginalized constituents in deliberation is being pursued, but realization presents an ongoing challenge. Imagining such processes as applied to the development of post-growth policies, this pursuit should additionally empower future constituencies. Proxies who represent groups and interests of the future in processes like the Committee on World Food Security could potentially avoid the worst of bias towards the present, but

¹⁷ Important to note is that the CSM might not fully represent 'empowered inclusion', as civil society is merely consulted on deliberated matters, rather than included as decision-makers.

this principle would likely also be controversial and a practical challenge to implement.

These examples are of state-involved processes, but sovereignty need not be construed as purely state-based. For instance, increases in communities' 'power to' (i.e. sovereign capacity) through improvements in food productive capacity *can* but *do not necessarily* rely on state intervention. Furthermore, sovereignty need not be limited to 'over' and 'against' notions of state power, and can instead or simultaneously rely on the creation of interdependent power, or 'relational sovereignty' (Iles and Montenegro de Wit, 2015). Relational sovereignty, simply put, is about building 'power with', through networked collaboration, such that legitimacy, capacity, and rules are developed not *against* other sovereign units, but *with* them. FSMs build their own productive capacities, recognition of their existence as sovereign, and connections with governmental, market, and civil societal allies, engaging many venues across scales, in order to bolster embedded and accountable food systems in localities everywhere. Relational sovereignty, processes develop, link, and engage institutional centers of power over food systems. These processes hold more promise for post-growth sovereignty than relying on corrupt and hollowed out states, or alternatives that would eliminate or exclude the state completely (and thus lose some 'power over'). FSMs, then, generally seek greater sovereignty partly *with* and *through* states, but never merely by expanding state sovereignty.

Like peasant production and multilevel deliberation, relational sovereignty may be a useful strategy, but it does not guarantee an outcome of food sovereignty or post-growth economies. Nor does it resolve tensions between actors in a pre-ordained fashion. A valuable addition to the equation would be the grounding of relational sovereignty processes, with deliberation as a key component of the relations between sovereign units, in explicit and shared values like food sovereignty or human rights. Relational sovereignty must be driven by values that promote the participation and prioritization of the most marginalized. Fox (2004: 3) argues that institutions that carry forward policies 'must be biased in favor of the poor'. Similarly, Mouffe argues that certain minimum shared commitments are necessary to carry out agonistic deliberation, such as the commitment to democracy itself. As FSMs indicate in their non-cooperation with organizations like the WTO, no relational sovereignty can be constructed between units that fundamentally disagree on basic principles, such as the WTO's commitment and FSMs' opposition to capitalist growth (see Vía Campesina, 2013).

FSMs' development through dialogue of new 'peasant human rights' has resulted in more communal visions of rights holders, and a less state-centered

vision of enforcement (Claeys, 2014). This de-centering of the state exists in tension with the necessity of a 'return to the state' called for by green theorists (Barry and Eckersley, 2005). Concurrently, the de-individualizing of rights leaves unresolved existing tensions between more collectivist sitings of sovereignty (that would prioritize groups and states over individuals) and more individualist views. Patel has come down on the side of the individual (2009: 671), but perhaps there is no 'proper' siting of sovereignty. Sovereignty's placement (in terms of classical 'over' and 'against' components) between individuals, communities, nations, supranational institutions, and different actors within those spaces, cannot be predetermined. Cultures and situations vary across the planet, each calling for particular complexes of norms and methods to achieve similar outcomes. Any effort to establish 'the right institutions' amidst human diversity will face inevitable tensions between actors and social groups whose values differ on (among other issues) the proper relation of individual to collective sovereignty. Thus, the siting of 'over/against' sovereignty (in the pursuit of food sovereignty as well as post-growth efforts more generally) will be negotiated within territories and between them. The 'power with' conceptions of governance embodied in FSM's relational sovereignty and deliberation-based rules development cannot be expected to fully replace this classical sovereignty nor resolve its negotiation process.

Thus, the key question is how to combine 'power over' with 'power with' and 'power to' forms of sovereignty. The deliberative model of relational sovereignty may work to elaborate pro-food sovereignty or counter-growth principles, and to gather capacity, legitimacy, and rules behind them. Yet deliberation itself is unsuited to defining how institutions are to enforce these rules in relation to many 'competing sovereignties' within and between units. One potential hope beyond this impasse is that there are many ways to relate those units, each potentially appropriate to different situations, resources, and conditions. Whether sovereign units overlap, are federalized, or relate on principles of subsidiarity¹⁸, structural and values-based checks and balances must frame inter-sovereign relationships. 'Power with' forms might be appropriate for some aspects of democratic governance processes (such as values development, prioritization, rule-making, and aligning advocacy pressure) but are less suited for others (like rule implementation within specific territories). Different kinds of democratic decision-making (voting, representation, direct involvement, citizen juries, roundtables, symposia, etc.) can coexist in any truly democratic regime, as long as they are guided by principles of empowered inclusion (Mouffe, 2011). It will be necessary to experiment with these forms in various contexts in order to

¹⁸ Which means, essentially, that rules are made at the lowest level possible.

develop institutional relations of sovereignty that are conducive to post-growth political-economy.

Imagined pathways and uncertain futures

FSMs and their academic allies combine action and theory to confront specific socio-ecological problems (like food systems) across diverse contexts. Through social learning and iterative redesign, forms of post-growth action change over time. This iterative approach to post-growth economies includes:

- a) modes of production and distribution that are not grounded in capitalist logics, that rely on coproduction with nature and are linked to political movements that challenge the capitalist calculus of growth;
- b) multiple forms of (self-)critical, deliberative, and ‘agonistic’ dialogues as post-growth forms of democracy; and
- c) relational sovereignty within and between sectors driven by shared ethics and accompanied by pro-poor forms of rule implementation as post-growth sovereignty.

The challenges of turning deliberation into policy and policy into implementation, combined with sovereignty’s many contests and confusions, indicate that ‘good design’ is not a panacea for institutional systems (Ostrom et al., 2007). In addition, there are clear limitations to applying lessons from the directly land-based production of food to broader industrialized economic production, such as computer technologies. Co-production, family-based production units, and agroecology are not easily transferable ideals (though ‘cradle-to-cradle’ production, cooperative businesses, and industrial ecology are existing parallel initiatives that could be investigated). Agonistic deliberation and relational sovereignty, however, seem to be more applicable outside food systems.

In constructing and refining better forms of political-economic organization through social learning, post-growth movements must institutionalize values that underpin this organization. This institutionalization of values will rely on the legitimization of non-capitalist modes of production, not their dismissal by academic critics (e.g. Bernstein, 2014). While critically assessing claims about peasants as ‘non-capitalist’ can be useful, material and theoretical support for ‘post-capitalist’ projects is crucial to combatting the pessimistic view that ‘there is no alternative’ to capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Rather than dismiss alternatives, like those developed by FSMs, as being of limited effectiveness or not sufficiently comprehensive (academically), theorists should examine the ways

in which these alternatives open up new avenues for rethinking and rebuilding society. One can maintain ‘pessimism of the intellect’ and question complexity-flattening descriptions of peasants while maintaining ‘optimism of the will’ – that is, a belief in the power of values and social action to bring about change towards those same descriptions. It is not enough to be critical – post-growth theorists must also be hopeful, maybe even utopian.

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the author

Antonio Roman-Alcalá has pursued food systems change through urban farming, research, academic and journalistic writing, media-making, and coalition-building. Currently, Antonio works to promote agroecology within the USA, teaches with the San Francisco Urban Permaculture Institute and maintains the blogantidogmatist.com.
Email: antidogmatist@gmail.com