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Cluster 2: Food Systems and Local Practice

Introduction: Lessons Learned from Indonesia, Latin America, and the United States

Douglas West*

At the 2007 Nyeleni food conference in Mali, six pillars of food sovereignty were developed to bring a deeper level of awareness and analysis to food security and globalism.¹ Food sovereignty differs from food security insofar as local communities are actually able to control their own food supplies as well as its production, processing, and distribution systems. The challenges of total food sovereignty are felt more acutely by those living on the economic and social margins - in the inner cities, rural areas, and regions that, while central to the food production system, are dissociated from the highly capitalized food companies' headquarters. This paradigm results in policy and decision making being taken out of local communities hands and centralized in increasingly large bureaucratic and corporations.

Worldwide food sovereignty has been compromised by a number of inter-related factors stemming from European-style colonization. "Theorizing the local" in the food sovereignty movement has become the focus of recent inquiry, and the articles and presentation in this section advance innovative and exciting approaches to this new research. The advance of colonial enterprises brought disease, consumerism, and a total disregard for the

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1. The 6 pillars of food sovereignty include: 1) focusing on food for people; 2) valuing food providers; 3) localizing food systems; 4) protecting local control; 5) building knowledge and skills; and 6) working with nature. *Six Pillars of Food Sovereignty*, FOOD SECURE CANADA, <http://foodsecurecanada.org/six-pillars-food-sovereignty> (last visited Oct. 3, 2011).

cultural relationships between people, animals, plants, and food. Any discussion of food security and food sovereignty must recognize that in the past 100 years, the amount of imported food to indigenous peoples has increased; while simultaneously, the drive of the developing world to become “GDP rich” has radically transformed communities and their lands that were traditionally agricultural. These developments have produced nutritionally starved populations in both the developed and developing worlds; a phenomenon that can aptly be dubbed *food colonialism*.

The planned substitution of traditional foods by industrial foodstuffs has had a significant effect on not only eating and social habits around the food table, but also on governance, economic activity and education. In most cities, various levels of government interact to ensure that a safe and secure food supply reaches consumers. But we must ask ourselves whether this constitutes food sovereignty and whether we can rely on the State to provide solutions to State-created problems. Shifting patterns of food consumption have been incorporated into the lives of indigenous peoples ever since European exploration and colonial occupation. In the post-colonial era, state colonialism has evolved into corporate colonial globalism. In the process, so called “country foods” - those foods that were traditionally consumed and culturally celebrated - have been replaced by imported, heavily processed, sugar-laden food stuffs. While this trend exists in all modern developing countries, including China, India and Brazil, people all over the globe are suffering from high diabetes, obesity, and heart disease, which results from the physical and cultural contamination of traditional food sources, the industrial effect of climate change, and cultural disintegration. This triple threat combines to be the most dangerous risk to food sovereignty on the planet.

Food production and food system strategies should focus on the “everyday” food producer and consumer. The rapid expansion of cityscapes has caused a decline in the continuity of active farming lifestyles and has produced a disconnect between European settlers and the ground that nurtures them. What settler populations are discovering is that permaculture and sustainability are actually built into the cosmologies of indigenous peoples. Simultaneously, First Peoples are using their domestic knowledge and positions of local governance to reclaim their traditions. In the struggle to decolonize the lands and lives of First Peoples all over the world, it is important that we focus more attention on local food production and less on state-centered corporate food produc-

tion. For example, as Scott Brainard concludes in his article on Indonesian agricultural policies:

The policies that have sanctioned the devastating effects of palm oil production on indigenous populations and the environment cannot be explained simply with appeals to greed, malice, misanthropy or xenophobic prejudice. Rather, the state-supported capitalist system which has developed in Indonesia since the 1960s—and not simply the ill will of a few individual actors—must be recognized and examined as the principal driver that has created the conditions under which attacks on civil society and the natural environment are permitted and supported by the State.²

The articles and presentations in this section reflect the breadth and depth of the food crisis where indigenous peoples struggle to maintain their cultures through unimpaired access to traditional foods. Both scholars have highlighted the capitalist colonial practices of the factory farm and corporate food systems and how they impact everyday consumption of nutritious foods. In developing areas, where indigenous peoples still have a foothold on the food supply, governments are attempting to emulate the Green Revolution (and now Gene Revolution) technology that saw the developed world's food systems become centralized for export, a corporate-driven and ultimately nutritional disaster. In their own way, each of the following pieces focuses on a specific aspect of this problem and draws our attention to the relationship between food production and democracy.

Scott Brainard argues that for developing countries, because of their addiction to the Western model of export-driven farm profits, "It is unlikely that any political reforms can be developed that will substantively address the very real problems of economic inequality and environmental degradation." What is necessary for food sovereignty and security to be embedded in economic practices is a wholesale paradigm shift in what some call the "culture of producing and eating food." Brainard identifies agricultural transformation as a key element in to combat the un-indigenizing efforts of neo-liberal capitalists in post-Suharto Indonesia. As Brainard suggests, the growing demand for bio-fuel alternatives to oil is the current driver of the agricultural policy regimes in

2. Scott Brainard, *The Impact of Indonesian Agricultural Policies on Indigenous Populations, Natural Resources and the Economy: The Limits of Democratic Self-Determination Under Capitalist Regimes*, 43 U. MIAMI INTER-AM. L. REV. 163, 191 (2012).

Indonesia. Palm oil in Indonesia, similar to corn in the United States, has become an important staple crop, guided by state policies that privilege larger producers. The effect on local food production is devastating, as increased amounts of fertile land are transferred to large-scale cash crop production. Consequently, indigenous cultural adaptation resembles the colonial legacy of imperialist resource extractive that “settled” developing areas, including the Americas, long ago.

Through a detailed study of the political effects of the post-Suharto regime change, Brainard is able to highlight agricultural transformation as a key element in the un-indigenizing efforts of world-order neo-liberal capitalism. The systemic colonial efforts of states vying for access to world markets has been accelerated as a result of “peak oil” emergencies and the need to grow sustainable economies. But what are we sustaining?

In Pamela Vesilind’s article entitled *The Path of Least Resistance Leads to Humane Labeling: A Proposal for Addressing Health Concerns about the “Factory Farm” Foods*, she describes the process of humane labeling in much of Latin America as a step forward in tracing the effects of factory food production, in this case the hog industry, on citizens’ health.³ For Vesilind, one of the main pillars of food sovereignty and security lies in the recognition and renegotiation of the essential relationship between people and animals. As Vesilind suggests, “To be successful on any meaningful level, the humane treatment labeling program would require a broad marketing and public relations campaign. A comprehensive outreach effort must be designed to appeal to varied demographics, values, and concerns; otherwise, the products will be marginalized as niche or premium.”

For Vesilind, one of the main pillars of food security and sovereignty lies in the re-negotiation and re-cognition of the essential relationship between people and animals. The marketing of processed animals must be accompanied by an “ethics of care” for the treatment of animals from birth to death. She argues that the industrial food system is responsible for creating a treatment regime for animals that disregards their quality of life, and that there must be a comprehensive review of animal welfare policies. Until developed and developing nations can achieve an awareness of basic animal rights, humane labeling system will have to suf-

3. Pamela Vesilind, *The Path of Least Resistance Leads to Humane Labeling: A Proposal for Addressing Health Concerns about the “Factory Farm” Foods*, 43 U. MIAMI INTER-AM. L. REV. 4 (2012).

fice. The public must be made aware of how humane animals are treated in the process from the farm to the table.

The articles and presentation based thereon represent a push towards the “indigenization” of the food movement and the localization of food sovereignty, a push towards where it belongs: at the grassroots level of societies. New foods have been introduced to traditional and indigenous societies, some by forceful colonial practice. The question that remains is whether dietary change or returning to traditional food alternatives holds the answer to diet-related illnesses and conditions like cancer and diabetes, which are linked to many other life-threatening illnesses. Can we de-colonize diets? What is the role that non-traditional societies play in this process? Do non-traditional or non-indigenous peoples also have to de-colonize their own diets?

The impact of the industrial food system on the well-being of many societies has become a major area of study since the Rome declaration on food security in 1996. For over twenty years a growing literature of cases, cautions, and solutions to the current dependency on corporate food has proven that sustainable food production lies in reconnecting with the local sources of nourishment. The “localization” of the food movement has led to the emergence of a wide variety of agricultural and foraging options for food procurement which include, but are not limited to, urban community gardens, SPIN gardens (small-plot-intensive), cooperative buying and producing operations, community supported agriculture(CSA), school gardens, roof-top gardens, greenhouse gardens. An equal number of non-traditional distribution mechanisms have also emerged. There is a growing fascination among “settler” populations in the Americas and elsewhere with the local food knowledge of indigenous and first peoples. These articles and presentation show that food movements across the globe are resisting the transnational-corporate food system in favor of a slower approach to understanding what food really is and where it actually comes from. They promote the privileging of the local over the “distancing” of the global.