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## Sovereignty in a Changing World: From Westphalia to Food Sovereignty

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**ABSTRACT** *This article traces the shifting meaning of the notion of sovereignty from the modern age to the age of globalization and its aftermath, envisaging new constellations of sovereignty taking shape across the globe. Observing the term's centrality in the configuration of the modern nation-state and its epochal semantic shifts, it briefly examines the concept's 'decline' during the era of globalization. It then introduces the notion of 'liquid sovereignty' in the context of rapidly changing ideas of territoriality, power, and interdependence. This in turn, it is argued, is connected with the surfacing of new forms of sovereignty centred on aliments, nutrition, and survival, encapsulated in the notion of 'food sovereignty'. The article suggests that the food sovereignty movement has helped in the recovery of basic aspects of sovereignty in a world threatened by climate change and neo-liberal globalization, as the cosmopolitical dimension merged with ethno-political claims, particularly amongst Indigenous Peoples in the Americas and, to a lesser extent, Western sub-state nationalist movements.*

**Keywords:** sovereignty, food sovereignty, ethnicity, state, climate change, neo-liberal globalization

### Introduction

The meaning of the term 'sovereignty' has shifted hugely through the centuries. Whereas the substantive 'sovereign' was once associated with the incumbent ruler, most usually the Prince, King, or Queen, after the French Revolution it became associated with the 'people' through the notion of 'popular sovereignty'. However, the latter was almost immediately seized by the nation-state, with which it became conceptually intertwined. In other words, the sovereignty

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of the people served to underpin the sovereignty of the state. The relationship changed again in the age of globalization and is currently undergoing further changes through new and forthcoming challenges. This article explores these changes and points towards possible new directions in the understanding of sovereignty as no longer centred on the nation-state, while moving beyond the so-called post-sovereignty literature.

In fact, a very important normative shift has taken shape in the political subject of sovereignty converging around the very basis of human sustainability through food, nutrition, and alimentation. Food sovereignty, we argue, is the most significant incarnation of the historical notion of sovereignty, because, as we shall explore, it emphasizes a constitutive aspect of human life and its relation to culture through an emerging constellation of power relations and oppositional politics. While sovereignty still concerns the state's rights to adopt and shape food policies, the subject has moved from the state to small-scale producers mobilizing, with or without the state, to defend their 'models of production and reproduction' (McMichael, 2015).

We argue that this permutation needs to be first placed in its *longue durée* historical context in order to fully grasp the extent of the challenge ahead, in which a multiplicity of actors are joining forces to confront epochal challenges—chiefly climate change (Levene & Conversi, 2014), which have to do with the survival of humankind as a whole. In this way, food sovereignty is conceived as a series of interlocked and rapidly expanding forms of 'alliance building' (McMichael, 2015).

We proceed in five stages. First, an historical excursus on the changing meaning of sovereignty preludes its waning significance in the 'post-sovereign' era. Second, we introduce the concept of 'liquid sovereignty' to encapsulate the rapidly shifting and adaptable plasticity of sovereignty in an uncertain and increasingly insecure world. Third, we attempt to delineate a looming post-globalization scenario, in which 'liquid sovereignty' interacts with the challenges posed by climate change and related socio-economic crises. Fourth, we discuss the emergence of food sovereignty as a possible 'historical turn' in the development of new forms of control of territory—whether existing nation-states will be able to embody, or appropriate, the new predisposition. While food sovereignty has a cosmopolitan dimension, it is simultaneously rooted in ethno-political demands. The final section explores how some states and governments have championed food sovereignty, while Indigenous Peoples, particularly in the Americas, have extensively appropriated it and it begins to surface amongst sub-state nationalist movements in Europe. The article finally discusses the ethno-territorial dimension of the food sovereignty movement and contrasts it with its eco-cosmopolitan understanding of human beings as deeply intertwined with, and constantly dependent on, the planet.

While disquisitions on the notion of 'sovereignty' have been a traditional staple in virtually all social sciences disciplines from their inception, food sovereignty has only recently begun to be explored in scholarly literature.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, the link between sovereignty and food sovereignty has scarcely been theorized across human and social science disciplines. Many studies are aware of such linkages. Yet, none of them has considered systematically food sovereignty in its *longue durée* context by connecting it to the political durability of the broader concept of sovereignty.

The focus of this article is the way the shifting meaning of sovereignty has been appropriated by new socio-political actors and has informed emerging political agendas across the globe. Initially, we consider the evolving historical meaning of sovereignty.

### Sovereignty's Historical Trajectory: From Westphalia to Globalization

Once upon a time, the 'Sovereign' was a person (or ruling group) within whom ultimate political authority resided and whose jurisdiction extended to, and was invested in, a specific territory. Charles Tilly identified 'fragmented sovereignty' as the dominant mode of governance in medieval and early modern Europe, with hundreds of city-states and minor principalities competing with empires and national states for territorial control—often of the same piece of land (Tilly, 1992, pp. 21, 31, 40–41). Between two and three hundred city-states were cohabiting in Italy's territory in AD 1200 (Waley & Dean, 2010), roughly the same number as ancient Greek city-states at the time of Pericles—most of them proudly independent, albeit under Athenian hegemony. According to Anderson (2013), 'different juridical instances were geographically interwoven and stratified, and plural allegiances, asymmetrical suzerainties and anomalous enclaves abounded' (p. 37). In other words, it was 'a form of segmental territorial rule that had none of the connotations of possessiveness and exclusiveness, conveyed by the modern concept of sovereignty. It represented a heteronomous organization of territorial rights and claims—of political space' (Ruggie, 1983, p. 275).

In the wake of the Reformation, religious conflict engulfed large swathes of the continent. According to the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* ('whose rule, his religion'), adopted by the Peace of Augsburg (1555), the incumbent ruler's religious confession should apply to the whole citizenry within his territory, thus introducing state religion. The wars of religion also took place to make the state's territory more 'congruent' with the ruler's religious creed. Wars of religion constituted attempts at ideological, rather than cultural, homogenization: the former resulted in the expulsion and massacre of religious minorities, in which ideas of morality, righteousness, and political legitimacy were all expressed through adherence to an overarching shared religious idea and creed. The latter would later result in the twentieth-century persecution of 'counter-entropic' minorities, in which common language, norms, traditions, and a set of behaviour, including dress and musical taste, were deemed to constitute a potential problem for, threat to, or deviance from, patriotic loyalty. Thus, the move was from religious persecution to cultural homogenization.

Following the wars of religion, the Peace of Westphalia (1648) recognized, among other things, the principle of non-intervention into the internal affairs of all signatories. Westphalian sovereignty applied to specific territories providing the foundation of the modern (i.e. Western) international state system, centred on mutual respect for the principle of territorial integrity—thereby placing sovereignty in the hands of the ruler: Power was circumscribed by whatever territory a ruler controlled (Biersteker & Weber, 1996). Following notions of sovereignty first defined by Bodin and then by Hobbes (Elden, 2013, pp. 259–268, 298–308), the age of absolute monarchy experimented with the exclusivity of sovereign jurisdiction, including the injunction that the sovereign should not be bound by his own laws and could legislate without his subjects' consent.

After the French Revolution, the entire edifice of absolutist legitimacy crumbled and political authority became valid only if it reflected or embodied the will of the people (or nation). Since nationalism was predicated on the myth of a common origin, language provided the raw material and *prima facie* evidence of shared descent (i.e. nationhood). Yet, the state form was kept intact. Absolutist centralism became revolutionary centralism and the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* was replaced by that of *cuius regio, eius natio* ('whose rule, his nation'). The relationship between Paris and the 'provinces' was not altered in form, but it was in intensity.

As Anderson (1983) stated:

In the modern conception, state sovereignty is fully, flatly, and evenly operative over each square centimetre of a legally demarcated territory. But in the older imagining, where states were defined by centres, borders were porous and indistinct, and sovereignties faded imperceptibly into one another. Hence, paradoxically enough, the ease with which pre-modern empires and kingdoms were able to sustain their rule over immensely heterogeneous, and often not even contiguous, populations for long periods of time. (p. 19)

We tend to forget how the ‘pre-sovereign era’ enveloped most of human history, the sovereign world order being relatively recent (Bellamy, 2006). Modernity soon became articulated around the nation-state (Conversi, 2008, 2012b). After the French Revolution, the state, as the key political institution, appropriated the notion of sovereignty for itself so that political legitimacy became increasingly based on national criteria. Not only incumbent rulers and governments, but the entire state structure with its institutions had, at least nominally, to represent the ‘people’ they ruled and who were defined on the basis of ethno-national criteria (Connor, 2004). In an era of fiercely competing nation-states, popular sovereignty presupposed an internal cohesion and homogeneity (the ‘people’) that rarely, if ever, existed in reality. ‘Counter-entropic’ groups and individuals were eliminated through assimilation, discrimination, expulsion, and mass murder (i.e. ethnic cleansing and genocide) (Mann, 2005).

The meaning of sovereignty has shifted again since the inception of neo-liberal globalization. Throughout the world, prevailing notions of sovereignty have been questioned following the social and political turmoil that began in the 1980s. Already by the mid-1990s, Sassen (1996, p. 10) observed a phenomenon of ‘de-sovereignization’ that later would become all pervasive:

U.S. firms such as Ford, IBM, and Exxon now employ well over fifty percent of their workers overseas, rankling both domestic workers who argue that jobs are being exported while unemployment soars at home and activists who contend that wealthy corporations are exploiting low-wage workers in Third World nations.

Sovereignty has thus become globally ‘cruciform’: the developed world has formed networks of shared *horizontal sovereignty* to project its power across the Global South through hierarchical networks of *vertical sovereignty* to guarantee resource extraction (Carmody, 2009). At the same time, the state’s flexible adaptations, with fluctuating degrees of sovereignty, manifest themselves in new forms of ‘graduated sovereignty’ through ‘different mixes of legal compromises and controls tailored to the requirements of special production zones’ (Ong, 2000, p. 55). In this way, the neo-liberal market-oriented agenda can strengthen state power in some areas, but not in others, while other specific demographic segments are governed in accordance with their differential relationships with global markets (Ong, 2000). These changes in the notion and perception of sovereignty have detracted legitimacy from the nation-state, as well as from specific governments, which are seen as no longer fully in charge, nor accountable.

### Liquid Sovereignty and Globalization

Given these conflicting notions of sovereignty, can a deeper, philosophical approach be identified to distinguish contemporary from previous forms of sovereignty? While the notion of ‘post-sovereignty’ mostly deals with institutional aspects (Bellamy, 2006; Keating, 2001), other approaches focus more on sociological and psychological components, and thus can help add substance to refine the conceptual tools we need.

Bauman (2000) uses the concept of *liquid modernity* to denote a world that cannot stand still and, like liquid, is in perpetual movement, so that its formless materiality takes the shape of the recipient(s) where it is placed. A world dominated by increasing mobility of capital and social elites is also a world permeated by precariousness, uncertainty (Bauman, 2005), fear (Bauman, 2006), and the frailty of human bonds (Bauman, 2003).

Here, we identify a parallel shift from *solid* (i.e. Westphalian) to *liquid sovereignty*. As an expression of late modernity, liquid modernity can be reconfigured as a fluid liaison with a specific territory, rather than a perpetual bond or solid relationship between place and power. Human, social, and political interactions become increasingly characterized by provisional rather than permanent commitment and questionable loyalty. In this shifting environment, it becomes next to impossible to speak about sovereignty in a Westphalian, state-centred sense.

Bauman, who never uses the term ‘liquid sovereignty’, ascribes the philosophical underpinning of the older territorially ingrained vision of sovereignty to the work of Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) who argued that sovereign authority is indispensable for the smooth functioning of the legal order. Because sovereignty is inextricably bound to a territory, for Schmitt, it is

unthinkable without an ‘outside’ ... Schmitt’s vision is as ‘localized’ as the sovereignty whose mystery it aims to unravel. It does not step beyond the practice and cognitive horizon of the made-in-heaven wedlock of territory and power ... The power of exemption would not be a mark of sovereignty were the sovereign power not wedded first to the territory. (Bauman, 2003, p. 288)

This leads inexorably to exclusivism: ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities became the main targets in the era of ascending ‘nation-statism’; they became the internal other whose fearing semblance was mobilized by the ruler to chip away ever more rights and cultures from their terrorized populations. Bauman (2003) defines sovereign power as ‘the power to define the limits of humanity, the lives of those humans who have fallen or have been thrown outside those limits are unworthy of being lived’ (p. 289).

While globalization has led to comprehensive changes in the relationship between place and power, its ultimate consequences are likely to result in a further erosion of sovereignty. For some scholars, the new ‘sovereigns’ are akin to powerful feudal lords, but on a global scale, they have a name, a face, and an identity, like Exxon, Microsoft, McDonalds, Monsanto, Shell, and so on (George, 2014). Their sovereign decisions are taken outside any form of democratic consultation, thus projecting a vision of remote or hidden forces dominating each single nation and individual. At the same time, their choices and actions have an unprecedented impact on individual behaviour, society, and the wider environment (Conversi, 2009, 2012a). These forces are thus seemingly converging towards the implosion of the very notion of sovereignty. The next section explores the possible liquidation of all forms of sovereignty as a consequence of extreme neo-liberalism and developmentalism.

### **Climate Change and Sovereignty’s Finale: Liquid vs. Residual Sovereignty**

The short circuit produced by neo-liberal globalization is visible in the ultimate challenge posed by climate change as the potential terminator of existential sovereignty. For instance, the question has been posed whether the physical disappearance of low-lying island states as a consequence of sea-level rises could allow them to keep a status analogous to statehood even if they were to lose all their territory (Yamamoto & Esteban, 2010). Could climate change victims’ governments-in-exile with their dispersed refugee diasporas still be entitled to some form of sovereignty? How meaningful would sovereignty be in this extreme, yet

rapidly approaching, scenario? *Liquefaction*, rather than liquidity, becomes a suitable description for the melting state at the edges of the neo-liberal *cul-de-sac*: the neo-liberal system's capacity for self-reform has revealed itself to be deficient in the light of economic recession (Harvey, 2010; Peck, 2010). It therefore follows that neo-liberalism is unlikely to be able to face the unprecedented challenges posed by climate change. The responses to these unprecedented challenges need to be sought in an entirely new lifestyle, mindset, and cultural understanding, beyond the old *étatiste* territorial trap, as well as the self-destructive irresponsibility of the neo-liberal world order.

Yet, while the looming reality of anthropogenic climate change begins to alter the deepest significance of 'sovereignty' as a viable concept, *territoriality*, the attribute of the territorially entrenched nation-state, remains a major obstacle to the pursuit of an orderly retreat from the fossil-fuel era (Kythreotis, 2012). In other words, the endurance of a Westphalian definition of territory as inviolable space has led political leaders to prioritize state 'interests' over global ones—at least amongst the most powerful states. Such a hidebound definition of sovereignty has repeatedly emerged during global climate talks and meetings, as in Kyoto and Copenhagen. Often rhetorically appealing to their residual 'sovereignty', states and governments have blocked any meaningful advance towards the abandonment of the hegemonic, fossil-fuel energized economy of profit. Residual notions of sovereignty are thus important factors in explaining the difficulty of reaching global agreements on emissions, not to mention the accompanying necessary transitional shift to a sustainable economy.

The alternative may come from beyond the spent and outdated ideological map of neo-liberalism. Thus, Ulrich Beck describes the formation of 'cosmopolitan communities of climate risk' as a global effort to avoid a consumerism-induced cataclysm. These are defined as 'new transnational constellations of social actors, arising from common experiences of mediated climatic threats, organized around pragmatic reasoning of causal relations and responsibilities' (Beck, Blok, Tyfield, & Zhang, 2013, p. 2). Beck prefigures the optimistic vista of a 'globalized change of consciousness and practice' and a 'reorientation towards *cosmopolitization*' (Beck et al., 2013, p. 1, my italics). But, behind this optimism, one can still discern the undisclosed chain of calamities looming ahead. The impact of climate change on any form of sovereignty is likely to be more devastating than previous human crises, revealing the lack of popular control over territory, economy, and environment. In fact, both the Westphalian and post-Westphalian orders incrementally reproduce, each in their own way, the developmentalist drive of the Western modernist world order.

Notwithstanding global media expurgation, 'climate transition' has begun to spawn a grand narrative guided by its own cosmology in pursuit of more resilient sovereign futures founded on agro-ecological production. The 'transition' movement includes social actors who have contributed to shaping global action against nutritional impoverishment, corporate greed, and the abuse of agro-food biotechnologies (Sage, 2014). Amongst the new agents of change, we focus on the movement for food sovereignty, which has spread internationally as one of the most comprehensive and plurally articulated responses to the devastating consequences of neo-liberal globalization. Under the banner of food sovereignty, the emerging agrarian and peasant social movements amalgamate anti-globalization, pro-democracy, and environmentalist agendas (Teubal, 2009)—in line with Beck's *cosmopolitization*. In terms of sovereignty, what is propounded here is nothing less than a 'sovereignty model founded on practices of agrarian citizenship', in the awareness of how agriculture has been historically linked to successive 'metabolic ruptures between society and nature' (Wittman, 2009, p. 805).

In short, only recently has a wholesale alternative to both state- and market-centred developmental modernism begun to emerge, implicating, and being reflected in, the notion of food sovereignty that is explored in the next section.

### **Back to Basics: Food as a Central Sovereign Subject**

‘We are what we eat’ goes the old adage. In fact, food not only affects our physical being and quality of life, but also exercises a deep impact on our personal and collective identity. Unlike language, which is composed of, and conveyed by, symbols (sounds and letters), food is physically graspable, materially grounded, and directly consumable. It is also essential to human, animal, and plant survival.

As the Italian culinary historian Massimo Montanari (2004, 2006) has shown, ‘everything having to do with food—its capture cultivation, preparation and consumption—represents a cultural act’; in other words, ‘food is culture’. The very notion of ‘culture’ is etymologically linked to cultivation (Latin *colere, colō, cultus*, = till or cultivate), thus providing a powerful metaphor in relation to agriculture. It is therefore not surprising that food has been under attack by the forces of globalization, which have dispensed with traditional agriculture by forcing standardized modes of production and consumption upon millions of people.

The responses have been articulated in various ways, converging around the need to recover the basic control of the food chain. A proliferation of initiatives has centred on the need to reassert sovereignty not merely over land, but also over food production, distribution, and consumption.

The ‘food sovereignty’ (*soberania alimentaria*) movement was launched in 1996 by *La Via Campesina* (‘Peasants’ Way’), an international network of peasant organizations (Claeys, 2015; Desmarais, 2007). The idea is centred, not only on the notion of food as a basic human right, but also on the right to produce and retain control over it. Its territorial dimensions are mutable, fluctuating, and open to interpretation, but food production is intrinsically dependent on control of soil, that is, sovereignty over land.

On the other hand, insofar as it incorporates a wide range of social actors beyond the peasantry from multiple environments, ethnicities, locations, and social classes, including both producers and consumers, food sovereignty may be loosely attached to prior notions of popular sovereignty. As we have discussed earlier, popular sovereignty has been historically absorbed by practices of state sovereignty so that the two have become drastically disjointed in political practice: once seized by the modern state, the ‘popular’ element of sovereignty eventually served as the political power’s fig leaf to legitimize the build-up of formidable coercive apparatuses of mass control (Conversi, 2007, 2008). In principle, the refocusing on the centrality of food as a basic right makes this type of disjunctions less likely. As we shall see, the problem is rather how far the notion can be altered if seized by the state and, if so, how the state can instrumentalize the ethnic underpinnings of the ‘popular’ dimension of food sovereignty.

It is important to bear in mind that the food sovereignty movement largely originated in response to the global agrarian restructuring that began in the late 1980s. This led to the massive dislocation of small producers such as peasants, farmers, pastoralists, fishers, and forest-dwellers induced by the ‘free trade’ agenda globally imposed by the World Trade Organization (Bello, 2009; Margulis, 2014; McMichael, 2015).

But how does food sovereignty relate to the historically evolving notion of sovereignty that we analysed earlier? The section that follows discusses the extent to which this notion is specifically relevant to the claims of sub-state nationalism and indigenous peoples.



### Whose Sovereignty? Food Sovereignty across Ethnic and National Boundaries

Like sovereignty in general, food sovereignty remains an ‘essentially contested’ concept (Collier, Hidalgo, & Maciuceanu, 2006). Who or what is sovereign? In respect to whom or what? And how far one can be sovereign? What has sovereignty to do with food sovereignty? Very recently, there has been a blossoming of research exploring these issues, including the sovereignty dimension of food sovereignty (Iles & Montenegro de Wit, 2015; Schiavoni, 2015; Shattuck, Schiavoni, & VanGelder, 2015). This is an ongoing debate to which this article aims to contribute from a broader historical perspective.

While attempting to respond to the questions above, we focus on the ethnic dimension of food sovereignty as a transnational movement. As the movement strives to achieve a significant international presence and attempt to change power relations, this ethnic dimension often remains in the background. In its place, a plural, multicultural vocation has emerged in all international fora, not merely for the sake of alliance building, but also to avoid the fissiparous trap of mono-culturalism, fundamentalism, essentialism, nationalism, and ethnic solipsism. Earlier on, we have seen how a latent ethnicity can be transformed into a dominant force once seized by the state in pursuance of the interests of political and economic elites.

Food sovereignty may focus more on group than on individual rights (Claeys, 2012, 2015; McMichael, 2015), but it is crucial to identify which groups are more typically involved. Throughout modern history, groups based on putative common descent, that is ethnic groups and nations, have formed the legitimating backbone of political authority and institution-building. Since the French Revolution, nationalism has thus accompanied the era of modern popular mass sovereignty (Conversi, 2012b, 2012c). In the nationalist worldview, territory is the single most important element of national sovereignty: sovereignty can hardly be imagined without a territory attached to it, the salient significance of which is constantly re-enacted in daily life rituals (Billig, 1995) and experienced through collective imagination (Anderson, 1983). However, because the ultimate actor in this territorial entrenchment is the Westphalian state itself, recalcitrant minorities, indigenous peoples, and stateless nations can hardly escape its iron cage. In other words, nations without a state provide no exception to the logic of territoriality, since they manifest themselves and operate in an international system of states.

Two parallel questions hence arise: Can the principles of food sovereignty transcend these boundaries? And can they simultaneously apply to, and be incorporated by, ethno-politics? This is largely a matter of exploring how far is the ethnic element present, or even central, in the articulation of food sovereignty. The answers largely depend on the context.

Food sovereignty can be both ethnic/national and universal/cosmopolitan: Raj Patel hinted at this complementarity while discussing the Kantian call for cosmopolitan federalism and moral universalism implicit in the vision of multiple, overlapping, and competing sovereignties (Patel, 2009, p. 668). Although *La Via Campesina* is a transnational coalition, it remains firmly rooted in local identities, indigenous struggles, and resistance movements against the central state and neo-liberal policies. These struggles are often permeated with identity politics through the intersection of environmental and ethnic dynamics—and often in contrast to state policies. Occasionally, disagreements emerge ‘over whether to follow an ethnic “Indianist” or a leftist “popular” line’.<sup>2</sup> They can also combine with radical Left nationalist discourse and practice: For instance, in the Basque Country, the Left nationalist coalition *Bildu* (f. 2011) has included food sovereignty among its key principles.<sup>3</sup> As the Basque case illustrates, in areas where ethno-political movements have been active at the local—specifically rural—level, these have tended to link with *La Via Campesina* from the very beginning—the Basque farmer and leader Paul Nicholson

being amongst its founding members (Shattuck et al., 2015, p. 422). However, instead of remaining localized, this discourse links with broader international programmes and participates in global social movements with shared aims and goals.

But other questions emerge: How is food sovereignty conceptualized by its protagonists? What does food sovereignty mean to its advocates? How do food ‘sovereignists’ conceptualize sovereignty? The concept of sovereignty used by the social movements articulated around food sovereignty is indefinite and malleable: ‘Food sovereignty theory has usually failed to indicate whether the “sovereign” is the nation, region or locality, or “the people”’ (Edelman, 2014, p. 959; see also Patel, 2009). Although several studies have related food sovereignty with indigenous peoples’ rights (Cornthassel, 2008; Grey & Patel, 2015; Kamal, Linklater, Thompson, & Dipple, 2015; Rudolph & McLachlan, 2013), its diffusion amongst sub-state nationalist movements in the West remains unexplored. This is largely because food sovereignty is still often associated with predominantly rural societies, while stateless nations in the West are for the most part located in highly urbanized, industrialized, or post-industrial societies. As the food sovereignty movement has spread across several Western regions, it has taken a particular meaning amongst self-identified ‘stateless nations’, where aspirations to national sovereignty date back several decades or centuries. New cross-ethnic networks of solidarity have been superimposed on older nationalist struggles, while food sovereignty discourses have been ‘recontextualized to make them relevant to their own circumstances’ (Shawki, 2015, p. 758).<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, while developing countries are moving towards Western patterns of mass food consumption and industrialized agriculture, developed post-industrial societies increasingly demand new consumer products associated with sustainability and ecological citizenship. The expanding demand for organic food and sustainable consumption has been sometimes associated with a relatively high standard of living (Seyfang, 2006). More clearly stated, food sovereignty politics have ‘travelled from countryside to city as consumers-citizens anticipate ecological constraints’ (McMichael, 2014), highlighting geographical and class-based differences related to food access, quality, and preferences (Friedmann, 1987; Friedmann & McMichael, 1989). Yet, while food sovereignty spread into urban areas of the developed world (Andrée, Ayres, Bosia, & Massicotte, 2014; Counihan and Siniscalchi 2014; Patel, 2011), the ‘localisation’ narrative at the heart of food sovereignty emerged in opposition to the ‘distance’ dimension in the dominant industrial food system, so that ‘localisation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for food sovereignty’ (Robbins, 2015, p. 449). All this points to the various ways in which food sovereignty can relate to the state, beyond the local level.

### **Food Sovereignty, the Nation, and the State**

The grassroots character of food sovereignty does not preclude the possibility that ‘sovereign’ states might enshrine it in their laws and constitutions. In fact, the concept has already been introduced into state policies: the first country to constitutionally enshrine food sovereignty was Ecuador in 2008 (Giunta, 2014). The constitution recognizes food and water as basic human rights: ‘Energy sovereignty shall not be achieved to the detriment of food sovereignty nor shall it affect the right to water’. There is ‘an obligation of the State in order to ensure that persons, communities, peoples and nations achieve self-sufficiency with respect to healthy and culturally appropriate food on a permanent basis’ (República del Ecuador, Constitución de 2008, Chap. 3).

However, the principles of food sovereignty are difficult to implement from above (Becker, 2011) and cannot be put into practice without the social movements and grassroots mobilization

that first brought them onto the political agenda (Giunta, 2014). In fact, the simultaneous institutionalization of food sovereignty and the indigenous people's claims reflect some of the aspirations of the Ecuadorian social movements and their 'buen vivir' philosophy (*Sumak Kawsay* in Kichwa) of pursuing a 'solidarity economy' model (Scarlatto, 2013). But such institutionalization has been severely tested by the Ecuadorian government's subsequent choice of a 'highly extractivist and modernist model based on bureaucratic and technocratic logics' (Alonso González & Vázquez, 2015, p. 315).

At the same time, the notion of food sovereignty is closely linked to the rights of indigenous peoples: Article 2 of the Ecuadorian Constitution proclaims Spanish, Kichwa, and Shuar as 'official languages for intercultural ties. The other ancestral languages are in official use by indigenous peoples in the areas where they live and in accordance with the terms set forth by law' (Ecuador, Asamblea, Constituyente, 2008). The Ecuadorian Constitution has thus enshrined *plurinationality* and *plurinationalism* (Becker, 2012; Jameson, 2011).

Similarly, in Bolivia, demands for food sovereignty combine with ethno-politics, as the 2009 Constitution changed the country's official name to 'Plurinational State of Bolivia' (*Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia*), while enshrining food security and sovereignty (Part IV, Title III, Art. 405). This was in recognition of the country's multi-ethnic diversity and the enhanced position of Bolivia's indigenous peoples (Lupien, 2011), although it contrasts with the state's development model 'based on the extraction of non-renewable natural resources' (Tockman & Cameron, 2014, p. 46).

As the food sovereignty movement reaches deeply into the grassroots level, it connects with pre-existing demands for political sovereignty, but retains its international breadth. Expanding amongst Indigenous Peoples around the world, the movement's very ontological foundations rest on an exchange of knowledge and cultural encounters. This has begun to spawn a form of 'inter-culturalism' as *diálogo de saberes* (dialog among different knowledge systems) through cross-class encounters between diverse rural cultures, including peasants, farmers, pastoralists, rural proletarians, and indigenous peoples (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014). In short, it can represent a new way of articulating sovereignty in opposition to both the neo-liberal world order and the nation-state system—despite the innovative institutionalization efforts mentioned earlier. Thus, the very ethnic dimensions of food sovereignty contribute to a cosmopolitan understanding of the interconnectedness of human experience and the multiple potentials of sovereign existence creeping up within the interstices of the liquid neo-liberal world order.

## Conclusion

While sovereignty remains a highly contested concept, there is general agreement that it is linked to power. In turn, this power is entrenched in the attempt to control a clearly bounded and recognized space. This territorial dimension of sovereignty is also central to food sovereignty, although it lacks the strategic aspects of international realpolitik with its expansionist inclinations. Land is traditionally associated with discrete ethnic groups, which claim entitlement to it in virtue of their ancestral bonds to territories that have been inhabited by their forefathers across generations. Thus, the ethno-political dimension can play both an implicit and an explicit role in the movements for food sovereignty.

While the modern nation-state has abused the idea of popular sovereignty, a historical chasm has erupted between the notion and the practice of sovereignty. These difficulties are

compounded with food sovereignty, which, while being articulated as a transnational movement, still needs to operate within the limits set by nation-states.

Moreover, sovereignty is not only *relative* (Berg & Kuusk, 2010), but also *relational*: one is always sovereign in relationship with, and in respect to, another (person or group) and this sovereignty remains, at least visually, bounded in space and grounded within a specific territory—a relationality central to the very notion of food sovereignty (Iles & Montenegro de Wit, 2013, 2015). Moreover, potential pathways to food sovereignty can manifest themselves through overlapping jurisdictions and multiple actors (Patel, 2009, 2010).

This article has explored the historical continuities in the notion of sovereignty, postulating its ambiguous, contradictory, conceptual recuperation in an age of extreme uncertainty, punctuated by neo-liberal encroachment, with climate change looming as a potential terminator of all possible forms of sovereignty. Although Westphalian notions have been radically altered, states still cling to them in a final attempt to avoid addressing the socio-economic costs required to avert global catastrophe.

While the very notion of sovereignty has become so blurred as to become ‘liquid’ in a globalized world, it has in fact resurrected in the elementary form of food sovereignty. With its overlapping jurisdictions, many actors and political several arenas involved, the constantly changing concept of food sovereignty might appear as liquid and malleable as the broader context in which it is set, but it has in fact proliferated in response, and in opposition, to the melting sovereignty of the neo-liberal world order.

In fact, food sovereignty moves beyond the liquidity of the post-modern world. It is liquid insofar as it adapts to a variety of contexts, while operating within the interstices of the capitalist imperative, taking advantage of the chinks in its armour, but without the passive, uncertain dimension that Zygmunt Bauman accords to the concept of ‘liquid modernity’. In that respect, it is far from being liquid: It operates in a liquid environment to affirm a multiple and ever-evolving bottom-up set of principles, based on alliance building across continents, families, professions, environments, cultures, classes, and gender so that it can be said to take a liquid form on the surface, while embodying a variety of expressions of the broader contemporary trends towards liquid sovereignty. However, food sovereignty is both institutionally liquid and immanently solid. While it has to adapt to a variety of institutional contexts, it is firmly grounded on the most solid of supports: land or soil. And, while its products are materially solid and tangible as food, it holds a deeply transformative potential through a thriving unified message: the need to democratically change power relations through a new relationship between small producers, conscientious consumers, and civic society—to the point that, in the words of Paul Nicholson, ‘today . . . food sovereignty is the principal alternative presented against capitalism, there is no other—the others are resistance’.<sup>5</sup>

The contemporary international system works in such a way as to make the actual exercise of sovereignty virtually unattainable. Consequently, sovereignty has largely become an obsolete concept in its descriptive capacity and is rarely applied to denote something tangible. Yet, while the signifier has changed, the signified has not: the notion of sovereignty remains a powerfully evocative force, just as its promise of self-determination evaporates.

We have shown how the new socio-economic conditions brought about by neo-liberal globalization and its inter-linked crises have inspired a vast array of inter-linked responses that directly bear upon emerging formulations of sovereignty. These have converged around notions of food sovereignty, where sovereignty is acquiring new meanings untypical of the modern era of nation-states, but possibly nearer to the pre-modern loose pattern of overlapping sovereignties. In this way, it is argued, the very notion of sovereignty has been

rescued from decay by the addition of a new universal dimension, no longer exclusively tied to the nation-state, stepping thus beyond Bauman's terms. At the same time, the universal disposition of a new aliment-based sovereignty remains deeply rooted in local dynamics, where ethnicity, nationality, multiculturalism, plurinationality, and post-ethnicity merge and combine.

We have finally moved the attention to food sovereignty as a potentially practical and feasible form of sovereignty encompassing both producers and consumers. It can be practical because, if people choose, they can exercise at least some control over what they eat, providing they have the legal-political resources, know-how and willingness to free themselves from food retailers and agro-business as they regain control of the supply chain.

In conclusion, the eco-political emergency has propelled us in new directions in which the dimensions of sovereignty discussed above can be concurrently practised and simultaneously present—from the political to the personal, from the consumer to the producer—while encompassing more hazy notions of liquid or malleable 'post-sovereignty'. All these forms are highly inter-related and such interconnectedness is enshrined in the notion of food sovereignty.

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### Notes

- 1 See the Special Issue on 'Food Sovereignty: Concept, Practice and Social Movements', *Globalizations*, 12(4), 2015 (Claeys, 2015; Figueroa, 2015; Gupta, 2015; Iles & Montenegro de Wit, 2015; Kamal et al., 2015; McMichael, 2015; Roman-Alcalá, 2015; Schiavoni, 2015; Shattuck et al., 2015; Visser, Mamonova, Spoor, & Nikulin, 2015). The *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 41(6), 2014 has also published an issue on 'Global Agrarian Transformations Volume 2: Critical Perspectives on Food Sovereignty' and the *Third World Quarterly*, 36(3), 2015, has dedicated a Special Issue to 'Food Sovereignty: convergence and contradictions, condition and challenges'.
- 2 This contrast emerged, for instance, during the Third Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Abya Yala (i.e. the American continent in the Kuna language) in Guatemala, March 2007 (Becker, 2008). For a brief synthesis of the relationship between cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and ethnicity, see Conversi (2000).
- 3 *Weekly News Bulletin of the Abertzale Left*, no. 94, Wednesday 26 September 2012. See also (Mann, 2014, Chap. 6).
- 4 For instance, within a broader 'unity in diversity' perspective, Québec's *Union Paysanne* has worked alongside Canada's National Farmers Union and Indigenous Peoples' movements in pursuance of a *souveraineté alimentaire* (food sovereignty), which cannot be reduced to the mere *souveraineté nationale* of mainstream nationalists (Desmarais & Wittman, 2014). For indigenous food sovereignty as a 'model for social learning', see Morrison (2011).

- 5 Paul Nicholson, plenary speech presented at the International Conference 'Food sovereignty: A critical dialogue', Yale University, 14–15 September 2013, available at <https://www.tni.org/en/multimedia/paul-nicholson-food-sovereignty-critical-dialogue>. Also cited in Shattuck et al. (2015, p. 422). See also Nicholson (2011).

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