



Doubts and Dissents on Food Sovereignty

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ABSTRACT. Working on the trope that propagating the concept of food sovereignty is akin to proselytizing a belief, the essay raises questions on the claims and intents of food sovereignty.

KEYWORDS. food sovereignty · Declaration of Nyéléni

Making sense of food sovereignty is like emptying a cornucopia. There is always the promise of plenty at the mouth of the horn and a deepening, tightening sense of dread as one peers into its depth.

In a study on debt relief movements that I took part several years ago, I was naïve enough to open it with a quotation from an author who enthused about the possibility of replicating the debt relief efforts of Philippine social movements all over the world (Ariate and Molmisa 2009, 25). The promise of solidarity, of giving birth to a global movement, blindsided me from the inutile end that waylaid many other “great” ideas. Whatever happened to the dreams of those who used to pump their fists in the air while singing “The Internationale”? Had George F. Kennan’s dominoes fallen? Where is the tsunami of democracy’s Third Wave? Why is it that nowadays the adjective “vibrant” is the common appendage of the phrase “civil society” rather than that of “Maoist communities”? These gargantuan dreams simply collapsed in the weight of their own ambition and in the callousness and brutality that these doctrines have spawned. From the rubble of these dreams, puny concepts of salvation were found by enterprising academics and would-be policymakers. Thus, now we have human security, responsibility to protect, and food sovereignty.

This is not in any way a systematic critique of food sovereignty. To provide coherence to this piece, let me start by saying that I am looking at this issue as I would look at an act of faith. It cannot be helped to think of pushing for food sovereignty as a proselytizing act.

Let me start with invasive species. An assumption related to achieving food sovereignty is that a particular locale must consume its own self-produced food products.

Food sovereignty is 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. (Declaration of Nyéléni 2007)

But what if there are invasive species? How should one deal with the South American golden *kuhol* (snail) and African *hito* (catfish), both imported to the Philippines as part of food security programs? If the preference is to plant and consume indigenous, endemic species, should adherents of food sovereignty employ aggressive measures to eviscerate these invasive species? Will cultivating these locally available invasive species for food sully the purity of the efforts towards food sovereignty? Or are compromise measures acceptable? All these questions are attempts on my part to express my (perhaps unfounded) assessment that the profession of faith to food sovereignty has not been matched by a similar zeal to contemplate the impact of such pursuit on local biodiversity. Current proselytizers of food sovereignty present their effort as innately beneficial to local ecosystems, that it is a restorative act. But how would it exactly pursue nourishing endemic, indigenous flora and fauna which may have been enmeshed and entangled with many invasive species? Should there be a crusade and a cleansing act?

The thought of crusades have made my mind slouch towards Bethlehem (apologies to Yeats's "The Second Coming"). The zeal for food sovereignty by the new converts must be tempered with a bit of history. Have we forgotten the kibbutz?

Seventy-five years after the first kibbutz was established, it seemed that all efforts had failed to create communities based on sharing and equality and able to flourish economically as a powerful and prestigious sector of society. (Ben Rafael 1997, 1)

Why is there hardly any mention of the kibbutz movement in current literature on food sovereignty? This omission is not because the scholars on food sovereignty have not heard of the kibbutz movement but rather the Israeli model is an example of how the pursuit of food sovereignty can go awry and have tyrannical effects. The history of the kibbutz movement has shown us how in the guise of self-sufficiency and security a community can be made an instrument of state aggression

and occupation. Imagine the undeniable chutzpah if the kibbutz had brandished food sovereignty in the face of Arab opposition. That, no doubt, would have rattled the peace-loving congregants of the church of food sovereignty. In not looking back at the kibbutz, are the high priests of food sovereignty attempting to silence the legacy of the Israeli experiment in anarchist utopia (for this characterization see Ben Rafael 1997, 18-23)? Are Kropotkin and Proudhon simply not acceptable forefathers to the current church that vows to fight against “imperialism, neo-liberalism, neo-colonialism and patriarchy, and all systems that impoverish life, resources and eco-systems, and the agents that promote the above such as international financial institutions, the World Trade Organisation, free trade agreements, transnational corporations, and governments that are antagonistic to their peoples” (Declaration of Nyéléni 2007)?

But the food sovereignty faithfuls, if they would not like to claim descent from the anarchists and utopians, must have the courage of the intellect to confront the issue of the state’s role in achieving food sovereignty. At present, there is too much faith placed on the salvationist role of civil society and social movements—that food sovereignty can be achieved mainly by the “people” or “the masses” or “the local farmers”. Sadly, we are not living in the precolonial days when religious missions were said to tame wanton savages into sedentary communities merely by bringing Christ into their lives. The food sovereignty proselytizers must be able to devise a *modus vivendi* with the state, not by ambivalently relegating the latter as dispenser of land on the one hand yet on that other it is being treated as a mere factotum of global food corporations. People within states are constrained by the administrative powers of said states. Farmers’ collectives and agrarian communities may decide what crops they want to cultivate, decide what enough for the community is, decide where to do the planting and harvesting. What they cannot simply put aside are the state infrastructures (roads, bridges, power lines, storage buildings, etc.) that will either enable or hobble them in making those decisions. Most developing states have laid out public works in the service of capital and votes. Re-functioning these infrastructures to serve food sovereignty might prove problematic; much more constructing new ones just to serve food sovereignty’s purpose. Can communities claim food sovereignty when the means of processing its food depends on another town or city or corporation? It is not uncommon in the Philippines, for example, for farmers to travel great

distances just to have their rice milled. Will advocates of food sovereignty cajole the state to provide roads and mills to these far flung communities? Should access to these state facilities be free? As food sovereignty attempts to drain food of its potential as capital, where will the state generate the financial resources that will sustain the infrastructures that in turn will make food sovereignty possible?

As the church fathers of food sovereignty grapple with the doctrine of the true faith, what will the converts of food sovereignty do against the possible tribes of heretics that will not fully profess the faith? In asking this question I am reminded of agrarian communities and artisanal groups that make a living out of alternative models of development, especially fair trade.

Fairtrade is an alternative approach to conventional trade and is based on a partnership between producers and consumers. Fairtrade offers producers a better deal and improved terms of trade. This allows them the opportunity to improve their lives and plan for their future. Fairtrade offers consumers a powerful way to reduce poverty through their every day shopping. (Fairtrade International 2011)

They are not producing for themselves per se. They are producing foods and crafts for faraway deities that demand in exchange as trade the sampling of their local products. Will food sovereignty doctrinaires issue an *auto-da-fé* in this regard? Or will syncretic faiths be found?

After the development heretics, how should the flock of food sovereignty proponents deal with the issue of refugees, migrants, and the stateless? This point alone can unleash cascading torrents of questions that will render the 2007 Declaration of Nyéléni as both puny and parochial. Take for example this section of the declaration:

Food sovereignty prioritizes local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal-fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. (Declaration of Nyéléni 2007)

How exactly will “prioritizes local and national economies” apply on peoples of Southeast Asia who are “nomadic hunter-gatherers, shifting cultivators, sea nomads, and peasants embedded in a market economy” that “have practiced for generations forms of political anarchy and social solidarity that appear in many other kinds of

societies only in evanescent millenarian movements or as utopian ideals” (Gibson and Sillander 2011, 1-2)?

When reflecting on food sovereignty, one is reminded of what Zygmunt Bauman wrote regarding “the product of the age of engagement and commitment . . . commitment to a purpose—the purpose being the establishment and the preservation of the accident/risk/uncertainty-free, ultimate order of perfect society” (Bauman 2003, 16). Bauman was talking about utopia. But in my doubt-addled mind, I thought he was talking about food sovereignty.✿

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