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Beyond Global Summity: Food Sovereignty as Localized Resistance to Globalization

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ABSTRACT
Recently there has been a marked shift reflecting increased theoretical interest and political practices embracing strategies of localism or relocalization against neoliberal globalization. Specifically, individuals, farmers, and communities embracing the framework of food sovereignty have increasingly adopted localism tactics in response to the globalization of food systems, the corporate agribusiness model, and attendant food crises. The spread of the food sovereignty concept from the global peasants’ movement Vía Campesina to locales as diverse as industrial France and the rural state of Vermont in the United States demonstrates the way in which food sovereignty has been appropriated in different international settings. Additionally, the turn toward localism merits further scrutiny as a reflection of an unsettling of forms of collective resistance at a moment of structural crisis in global capitalism. Localism as an alter-globalization tactic is still overshadowed by protest summity and large-scale mobilizations, when small-scale micro-encounters arguably are part of a growing, broader, and more nuanced process of transnational diffusion of resistances, struggles, and reformulations over sovereignty at multiple political and social scales.

Keywords: food sovereignty, neoliberal globalization, localism, microresistance, France, Vermont, global agribusiness, alter-globalization

The June 2006 ‘Chicken Pizza Direct Action’ is folkloric. Vermont restaurant owner George Schenk challenged state authorities by threatening to serve chicken from a nearby farm in his restaurant without proper state certification. Schenk, the founder and president of American Flat-bread, qualified his ‘entrepreneurial nonviolent civil disobedience’ (St Peter, 2006) as a means of raising greater awareness about regulatory barriers that undercut the rights of citizens to choose where and from whom they buy their food. Schenk’s defense of food sovereignty challenged
government policies favoring industrial agribusiness and factory farmed meat at the expense of small farmers and consumers knowledgeable about the source and safety of their food. While the farm in question sold chickens directly to consumers, it could not sell to retail businesses without a state approved slaughterhouse facility. Remarked Connie Gaylord, whose chicken farm lies directly across the street from American Flatbread, ‘why force us to do something which means we get bigger . . . why can’t local just stay local . . . why does everything have to come from far away?’ (Porter, 2006).

Eighteen months later and across the Atlantic, the more renowned farmer José Bové, from the French region of Larzac, launched a hunger strike to win a one-year ban on genetically modified (GMO) crops. A worldwide activist-celebrity and one-time anti-neoliberal candidate for president of France, Bové popularized food sovereignty by associating GMO seeds and other symbols of food’s global commodification with threats to the rural way of life and the quality of food stuffs, concerns widely shared by the French population. Ridiculing the government’s proposed temporary ban on the commercial use of GMOs, Bové argued that his action, in concert with a dozen other activists, called attention to research questioning the safety of modified seeds, and more broadly to the public’s right to grow and eat food untainted by multinational agribusiness. The ensuing eight-day hunger strike resulted in a political victory when French officials banned the commercial use of MON810, a transgenic maize developed by Monsanto (Kempf, 2008).

Does the Vermont story, with its emphasis on local foods, locavore eating (often called locavore outside New England), and food democracy, represent a branch of the global food sovereignty movement illustrated by our Larzac farmer’s actions in France? Conceptually specific and vague in its usage, ‘food sovereignty’ was coined by the international farmer and peasant collective Vía Campesina at the World Food Summit in 1996, demanding greater local control over food systems in response to the industrialization and commodification of food under neoliberal globalization. In the US, food sovereignty might be framed as food democracy; nonetheless, the premise and priorities remain the same whether named democracy or sovereignty. Noting such differences, we call attention to how claims-making and grievance-naming within the Larzac movement and among Vermonters share some sustained transnational relationships within the food sovereignty movement, yet their roots and organization as local food movement also clearly pre-date the emergence of Vía Campesina, in which many of these activists participated. Moreover, actors in the small rural US state of Vermont and this rural region of industrial France engaged in acts of contention that, while borrowing ideas from a durable transnational farmer and peasant movement, in fact reflect distinctly local forms of ongoing resistance and alternative contentious politics in reaction to the industrial food system. These illustrate varied processes of contention that differ in degree of local–global interaction and in terms of the invocation of state authority against global institutions.

Nonetheless, the localized actions of farmers in Vermont and local and global intersections in Larzac together require a reassessment of popular protest strategies at a historical period of the Great Financial Crisis (Foster & Magdoff, 2009), as they presage a hinge moment before the long anticipated structural crisis of global commodity capitalism. Through the 1970s, the political power of the state served as the main countervailing force against the worst excesses of capital, while increasingly in the post-Cold War era of neoliberal globalization, new patterns of cross-border transnational protest emerged as countervailing pressures to challenge the reigning capitalist market orthodoxy inherent in emerging free trade agreements, neoliberal economic institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), or multinational corporations (Ayres, 1998, 2004; Bandy & Smith, 2004; Khagram et al., 2002; Smith & Johnston, 2002).
We explore the burgeoning strategy of relocalization and in particular the diffusion of localizing strategies around the concept of food sovereignty. The discussion focuses on what we call localism as a means of rearticulating an effective while diffuse platform of resistance to global capitalism evident in agribusiness. Specifically, we are interested in illustrating how the concept of food sovereignty is realized and resonates in local practices employed strategically and everyday to reject or secede from the global agribusiness model, within the confines of our two cases. For illustration, we examine the direct appropriation of the food sovereignty framework within the Larzac movement in France as an issue of governmentality and its use in terms of local autonomy, food sources, and food democracy among food activists in Vermont. Through a descriptive comparative study, we present these two locales as exemplary centers of food movement activity, and illustrate how distinct historical developments shaped different manifestations of a shared concern for food sovereignty.

Yet, beyond social movement dynamics, the current crisis in the global agribusiness model as well as the deeper structural crisis in capitalism have both affirmed and unsettled traditional state-level as well as more recent versions of transnational methods of popular resistance. In the Larzac movement, we see a deeply structured response to the state’s imposition of agribusiness models and the threat of neoliberal globalization. A long tradition of rural preservation, state regulation of food as local, and even the failures of 1968 provide opportunities for organizing as they close off other channels, always with a clear eye to both local communities, global actors, and state mediation. As a site of local resistance in the US, Vermont provides a contrast, especially in its anarchic practices. However, in comparison with the actions of French farmers, we show that it is a more entrepreneurial, local market based response to organizing against food commodification, and as a valid form of localism or relocalization, illustrates an accessible and adopted form of small-scale individual or community empowerment even as the role of the state is limited.

‘All Politics is Local’: Diffusion and Food Sovereignty

Recent scholarship has turned towards increased theoretical interest in political practices embracing varieties of localism as strategies to resist neoliberal globalization (Changfoot, 2007; Conway, 2004; DuPuis & Block, 2008; Evans, 2008). While cognizant of the hegemonic power that neoliberalism has had in the post-Cold War Era over the imaginations of mass publics, they are as well critical that local spaces, local resistance or relocalization strategies have often times been ‘eclipsed as sites of political engagement with the rise of globalization discourse’ (Changfoot, 2007, p. 129; quoting Magnusson, 2005). Even so, localism has been especially appropriated by farmers, peasants, and other popular sector groups concerned about the globalization of food systems and attendant food crises (Feagan, 2007; Huey, 2005; Norberg-Hodge, 2002; Starr et al., 2003). For some, localism refers to greater local control and participatory democracy—local production for local consumption, using local resources under the guidance and control of local communities. Others embrace more explicitly anti-capitalist politics, using local strategies and mobilizing local food movements as vehicles to resist or secede from the capitalist system of food production, exchange, and distribution. Regardless of political intentions though, frequently, as Feagan notes, ‘the place of food seems to be the quiet centre of discourse emerging from these movements’ (Feagan, 2007, p. 23).

While recognizing that similar ideas, tactics, and discourses around the politics of food in different parts of the world might draw attention to processes of protest diffusion (McAdam & Rucht, 1993; Tarrow, 2005), we consider the relationship between globally inspired
challenges and campaigns transformed through culturally acceptable meanings in new local settings as the interaction of global macroclimates and the local microclimates where globalization is realized and resisted (Bosia, 2009). Our jumping off point is the macroclimate of neoliberal globalization that subjugates farmers and peasants globally to the imperatives of large-scale supermarket chains in advanced industrialized markets, as well as the organization of a global response through Vía Campesina. But we focus on the microclimates where relocalization seeks to strengthen rural communities and restore some sense of autonomy or sovereignty. We are interested in exploring the degree to which political and social actors in Larzac and in Vermont, while having only some direct relationships, have developed a similar praxis by targeting agricultural capitalism and industrial agribusiness through either political or economic action. In this way, we juxtapose the more producer oriented politics in Larzac with the consumer-centered politics of Vermont.

Again, while the local food movements in Larzac and Vermont developed along distinct trajectories, the food sovereignty concept is a useful term for conceptualizing much of the logic behind their activities. From land rights to global trade, food activists at global Vía Campesina meetings elaborated ‘food sovereignty’ as a set of political claims and rights between 1996 and 2000 (Desmarais, 2005; see also, 2007). According to these charters, food sovereignty encapsulates the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant. ¹

As Food First co-director Peter Rossett notes, Vía Campesina draws a critical distinction between economic development models in rural communities: one that gives priority of market access to local producers (food sovereignty) versus the more dominant post-Cold War model giving priority of market access on the basis of market power and subsidized prices for multinational agribusiness (neoliberalism) (Rosset, 2003).

The concept of food sovereignty, with its emphasis on the empowerment of the local, sustainability, and self-reliance, has taken root in locales as geographically and culturally dispersed as Vermont and Larzac, even with the former’s relative distance from Vía Campesina as compared to the founding role of French farmers in the international movement. Farmers adapted the food sovereignty frame and made it relevant to their own situations, in ways that reflect unique conflict structures—the resources and political opportunities and cultural settings—that provided acceptable environments for food sovereignty to take root in rural regions of both the US and France. Because we are skeptical about the degree of intensity of transnational integration and connections between these locales, we are interested in how food sovereignty was reformulated within domestically appropriate actions and tactics.

Moreover, we examine the tactics and ideas surrounding food sovereignty in these different locales to provide insights into what James Mittelman (2004) has referred to as ‘microencounters’ or ‘microresistance to globalization’. Mittelman calls microresistance ‘countless diverse acts and beliefs that send forth streams of doubt and questions concerning the viability and sustainability of neoliberal globalization’ (2004, p. 26). When Vermont farmers, food activists, and rural workers and increasingly knowledgeable consumers prioritize local farms and markets, organic produce, or food grown locally over that shipped thousands of miles, they are participating in acts of resistance that are often times hidden below the surface of more widely known mobilizations against multinationals and corporate control. In fact, the comparison between Larzac and Vermont demonstrates that the variable levels of economic and political effect of
such resistance are not analytically determinant, as they remain vital as local manifestations of both everyday and broader strategies of resistance even as they might be directed either inward as in Vermont or out toward empowered domestic institutions as in Larzac.

Indeed, food sovereignty has become a meaningful and tangible concept for many engaged in daily and strategic local acts of reflection and resistance to an increasingly delegitimized global agribusiness model. In fact, multiple acts of local resistance feed a subversive, less easily discernable discourse potentially far more accessible and acceptable to the many lower and middle income people otherwise too occupationally preoccupied or financially constrained to travel great distances to attend People’s Summits and protest summitry. Moreover, the global financial crisis, the underlying structural crisis of capitalism, and immense and pending global and local environmental challenges (Bello, 2008; Wallerstein, 2009) have destabilized social systems and present uncertain challenges to political regimes such that neoliberalism’s hegemonic common-sense understanding of what is natural and inevitable in the recent era of globalization has been damaged. Today, the populist outrage and social dissent accompanying this moment of crisis and de-globalization reflects an unsettling of forms of collective resistance, creating new opportunities to assess appropriate areas for political struggle and alternative politics.

The Larzac Movement: Class Solidarity, Colonialism, and Cuisine

One iconic image from the global campaign for food sovereignty is that of the 300 farmers under the leadership of ‘The French Farmer’ José Bové dismantling a yet to be opened McDonald’s in Millau, France, in the summer of 1999. ‘The structure was very flimsy,’ Bové reported, noting that it was put together like a kit and easy to take apart. Demonstrators, including children, loaded the fragments of American fast food culture onto a tractor trailer, and deposited them unceremoniously on the doorstep of the prefecture. Bové, arrested with other organizers, refused bail and became a cause célèbre both at home and among the growing movement against industrial agriculture around the world.

Despite a persistent myth in the English speaking world that Bové was just fighting ‘malbouffe’ or ‘junk food’ (Reuters, 2008), the ‘French farmer’ in fact was coming to the aid of friends and neighbors around Millau who produced Roquefort cheese, who were targeted by the US for trade retaliation under the procedures of the WTO after the European Union refused to allow the importation of American beef raised with growth hormones. Though global in nature, this event in its genealogy and as it is situated in the French branch of the food sovereignty movement suggests the localization of diffusion necessary for understanding both local responses to agribusiness and how localvores and organic farming in the US do indeed represent the American branch of a diffused global social movement. Rhetorical similarities between France and the US tell us as much about their historical-contextual differences as they do commonalities, indicating points of contemporary agreement and departure over food sovereignty and its relationship to the state as a response to global agriculture. Indeed, the Larzac movement in rural France is a more structured resistance with origins in the everyday practices of farmers and regulatory logic of the French state, but reaching through a kind of high speed network that connects local and global in ways that indicate the authentic resistance as well as the unstructured and profoundly local nature of the American movement.

Both the American and French movements have origins in student organizing in the 1960s as well as responses to the Cold War and Vietnam, in many ways, sharing a romantic attachment to rural life and communal living (from the French word ‘commune’ or town), a fondness for
natural over industrial processes, a national and historic obsession with the family farm, and a
network of transatlantic experiences and relationships on the ground stretching from the
hippie communes of Northern California to the anti-globalization demonstrations in Seattle in
1999. José Bové, raised in part in Berkeley during the 1960s’ counterculture, professes a fond-
ness for an American environmentalist icon, Henry David Thoreau.

Nevertheless, the experience of the 1960s was strikingly different, with the Larzac movement
tied more to social solidarity and less to an idiosyncratic counterculture. As well, the family farm
is politically paradigmatic in both countries, but the peasantry and rural life in France remains a
pointedly preserved domain even through various modernization programs. Further, peasant
production is tied to French cuisine, and the self-defense of French farmers is more class and
labor union based and less personally self-reliant. Instead of cross-national commonalities,
surface similarities in trajectory and the diffusions of ideas mask distinctions that help
explain why the French movement is more global, while the American is profoundly local.
These differences also help us understand why, unlike his American counterparts, conservative
French president Nicolas Sarkozy would promise during his 2007 campaign to use the French
veto at the WTO to defend French peasants: ‘the independence of French food is a priority’.
To understand the differences that characterize French food sovereignty, we highlight the mul-
tiple origins of the McDonald’s demonstration in 1999 and a uniquely French response predi-
cated on concepts of social class, French cuisine as a system of regulation, and forms of
solidarity, universalism, and anti-colonialism inherent in the French left’s conception of self.

French Peasants: Was Marx Wrong?

In his analysis of Louis Napoleon’s 1851 coup, Marx famously referred to peasants as a ‘sack of
potatoes’. In reality, French peasants have been the target of government policy and political
organization, from the peasant soldiers who did the heavy lifting for Napoleon’s empire to
the peasant voters who helped center a Third Republic torn between the forces of tradition
and those of urban labor. Indeed, the peasantry has long been one key to the construction of
France as a nation and state as well as the nation’s mythic foundation (Hazareesingh, 1999).
Until the 1930s, the model of governance Hoffman called a ‘stalemate society’ (Hoffman,
1961) promoted stability over robust modernization, preserving rural life and the tie between
peasant and land in ways that discouraged rural transformation. While US modernization
reduced the ratio of farm population to less than one-third by 1916, France maintained that pro-
portion until the late 1940s, and while urban life had grown to 79% in Britain and 65% of
Germans by the 1950s, French urbanization lagged at 55%.²

Though Chambres d’agriculture established in 1924 began organizing farmers, only during
the ‘30 Glorious Years’ did new philosophies of state promote rapid transformation and modern-
ization, changing peasant life significantly and reducing the proportion of French men and
women on the farm. With peasants in mind, French governments transformed rural as they
did urban living, modernizing agriculture and promoting farm consolidation through commodi-
fied, mechanized, and highly energy dependent agriculture, targeting national self sufficiency as
well as cash generating exports. While 3.4% of French workers labor on the land today,³ the
number of farms declined and the average size increased, from 3,847,000 farms in 1979 to
1,100,000 in 2005. Small farms of less than 49.7 acres declined from 1,791,000 in 1955 to
237,000 in 2005.⁴ Key segments of the peasantry cooperated in these changes, especially
through the Fédération Nationale des Syndicats d’Exploitants Agricole. Younger farmers
began their own organizing sections within the broader movement, as many peasants saw

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commercialization as a way of preserving peasant life. Today, French farms earn the bulk of agriculture subsidies from the European Union and provide the lion’s share of produce.

The 1960s: Maoist and Peasant Dissent

The 30 Glorious Years as well fostered a reaction to commercialization and modernization that ultimately nourished a food sovereignty movement. While modernization created an urban generation raised with increasing consumer affluence and opportunity, the dynamics of the centralizing state with a bureaucratic and industrial elite created a ‘blocked society’ that sowed the seeds of discontent as it attempted to impose instead of co-opt, both in the cities and on the farm (Crozier, 1999; Wieviorka, 1984). Modernization improved incomes for many, but state-imposed modernization mimicked colonial relationships of tutelage between the center and the periphery. Similar to the youth movement in the US, young French men and women in the 1960s reacted to the policies of the state, particularly in relation to militarism and French neocolonialism, and so willingly bridged the local and the global. Different from their American counterparts, the social orientation of the French students ultimately resulted in an explicitly class-based alliance.

But it was a different alliance than the one they envisioned during the events of May 1968. Despite a massive general strike that capitalized on the student movement, and the spontaneous occupation of factories by workers, organized labor and the Communist Party remained indifferent if not hostile, cooperating with police to lock the factory gates at Renault and block 4,000 students marching to support the workers occupying the facility without union approval. After May, the anti-consumerist, anti-authoritarian, anti-bureaucratic, and anti-war consensus that inspired the students propelled a segment of them into the countryside, borrowing heavily from Maoist strategy and their own disillusionment with organized labor.

Instead, students imagined an alliance with peasants. In Larzac, they found peasants facing the expropriation of vast tracts of land for expansion of a military base to be used as grounds for missile and tank exercises to replace outposts lost in the former colonies. Historian Herman Lebovics provides an analysis of the Larzac movement focusing on the interventions of a French version of Mao’s Red Guard, with urban students ‘settling down’ among peasants as the new organic intellectuals (Lebovics, 2004). Because local leaders of the right wing UDF party had been buying up farmland on the cheap in anticipation of a military takeover, students who came down to help awaken a peasant movement found peasants already sharing an a similar antagonism to the state. There was distrust at first, as students became squatters on the newly nationalized lands yet to be occupied by the army, a bit ragged like their peers on communes in the US and often called ‘dirty hippies’ by the locals. Nevertheless, according to Lebovics, the assault represented by the expansion of the military base provided a shared soil upon which students and peasants could meet.

While peasants were anxious and frustrated, young people objected to the neocolonial French presence in West Africa as well as cooperation with the US, while farmers were primarily concerned with the loss of land and the disregard of both the military and the party officials who profiteered from the decisions made in Paris. But peasants and students came to share a sense that the French administration was an occupying force, and conceptualized the local struggle as part of an anti-colonial movement located at the same moment in Larzac, the colony of New Caledonia, the former colonies in West Africa, and Vietnam. This coalition reflects what Lebovics characterizes as postcolonial regionalism, calling attention to the historic relationship of Paris to the countryside that has modeled and been modeled on the colonial
project. In the colonies, the mission of French officialdom was to civilize through language and education, and modernize through the commercial expropriation of resources (Conklin, 2000). French peasants, as the preoccupation of the state administration, were to be similarly civilized through education in the nineteenth century and agricultural exploitation (called modernization) in the twentieth. Increasingly, Larzac became a site for resistance, with peasants from the remaining colonies, the former French colonial empire, and increasingly from the expanding network of activists throughout the Global South arriving in Larzac, and celebrate bonds of global class solidarity. At the same time, French peasants positioned themselves as opponents of a militaristic neocolonial and commercial state, universalizing the interests of French peasants and crafting the rural struggle as an expression of a global movement.

However, the peasant reaction to the state as a rural occupying force pre-dates the arrival of the students, as indicated by French historian (and former peasant organizer) René Bourrigaud, who reveals a fertilization of the soil earlier in the 1960s, so that when students came down from the universities, they had suitable ground in which to take root (Bourrigaud, 2008). While the FSNEA and Jeunes Agriculteurs (JA: Young Farmers) had cooperated in the professionalization and commercialization of farming, in the 1960s young farmers—particularly in the Loire not far from Larzac—became distinctly more radical, turning against commercialization to organize peasants along class and not professional lines, in the tradition of industrial unions. Bernard Lambert was one, joining the Jeunesse Agricole Chrétienne in 1947 before taking over the family farm in the Loire. By 1967, peasants working within the FSNEA and in JA were organizing as well with the dominant socialist and communist labor unions in Paris, and in 1968 peasants in the Loire marched with workers and students in 16 towns of the rural west. Lambert, a veteran of the Algerian War, published the influential Farmers in the Class Struggle in 1970.

Bové joined the students and peasants organizing in Larzac and squatted on a parcel of expropriated land. Denied credit as well as electricity, harassed by authorities, he and other squatters faced a formidable task in rehabilitating abandoned farms beyond the level of subsistence agriculture. Bové and Lambert met in 1973, and they founded the Confédération Paysanne in the 1980s, the second largest association of farmers in France, organized as a labor union of peasant workers. Through electoral organizing and direct action, the Confederation targets an agricultural model it considers responsible for ‘overproduction, public health crises, the degradation of the natural environment, gross inequality across local, national, and global borders, and the sharp decline in the number of peasants’.

By joining a consortium of European farmer groups that ultimately became the European Farmers’ Coordination, Bové and the Confédération Paysanne play leadership roles in Via Campesina.

The unfinished McDonald’s in Millau provided a convenient and loaded target when the US government launched a trade war on local cheesemakers. Bové and his allies are cautious in distinguishing between an American political-industry complex, on one hand, and the American people and American farmers on the other. As Kuisel explains, the question of American economic influence in France implicates culture and politics (Kuisel, 1993). From the authorization of Coca-Cola in the 1950s to the later expansion of McDonald’s and the importation of industrial food products, the American model threatens incomes and a distinct way of life, social solidarity, and a distaste for profit. By the 1990s, the threat posed by American culture became a veil for economic reform, as socialist and conservative governments associated American multiculturalism with Arab tribalism as the real threat to French culture at the same time they adopted Wall Street investment and profit models that began to undermine French notions of social solidarity.

It is the false anti-Americanism of the political elite—attacking American multiculturalism as they embrace American profit motives—that the peasant workers often clarify their position.
against. Bové’s assault is on ‘malbouffe’, which is not a form of American dominance but corporate dominance, dangerous to peasants in France and to the family farmer in the US, a threat to economic survival and the distinctly peasant nature of French culture. François Dufour, a leading peasant with Bové in Millau, explains their outreach to Americans at a film festival that year: ‘... We wanted to explain to the American festival-goers that it was not their culture we objected to: that it was very welcome in our regions, but that the multinational companies had to respect our differences, our identity’ (Bové et al., 2001, p. 20).

‘Malbouffe’ as a product of multinational globalization is inextricably in contestation with cuisine as a cultural field in France (Ferguson, 1998). French food—state authorized, institutionally as well as culturally empowered, framed through expertise—is a highly articulated and densely packed network of relationships, norms, rules, and regulations. Even as the state commercializes agriculture, it makes legible the production and attribution of historically and distinctly French products through the authority of the state bureaucracy. This ambiguity fuses the French desire to promote the superiority of French products like wine and Roquefort in global markets, with the promotion of larger and larger systems of production and mechanization, dismantling the very logic of local production that constitutes French cuisine. Even in its contradictions, however, French cuisine represents the height of taste and authenticity as both the ‘haute cuisine’ of the jet set and the hearty food of ‘cuisine grand-mère’, against the poisonous nature of ‘malbouffe’ represented not just by McDonald’s but all systems of industrialized agriculture.

This sense of the local is distinct from the American. For Americans, the local often responds to a postindustrial world threatened by global warming and peak oil; in France, the local returns to the preindustrial heart of French culture. French cuisine is crafted through a process of careful and cautious assimilation and authorization that is inherently a celebration of the local and the national against the global. The dismantling of the McDonald’s at Millau is at one moment: an intensely local reaction to a global threat; a national response to globalization; a French rejection of American profiteering; the preservation of distinct cultures against the monotony of industrial food; a call for state protections in support of peasant life globally; and a call to history in order to reach forward. Imbedded in economic and cultural politics, the Confédération Paysanne, in its advocacy of food sovereignty, recalls the industrial protectionism that dominated the French postwar political economy until the 1980s. As well, the elaboration of cuisine as a distinct field of sociopolitical life is integrated in the notion of the local, and the return to local artisan expertise is an adaptation to but not rejection of the expertise tied to the legitimacy of the French bureaucratic elite. Despite shared origins in the student movements of the 1960s and the reliance on local reactions to global industrial practices—even the emphasis on the artisan over the mechanized—French food sovereignty differs from the American in its decidedly peasant orientation with global linkages resulting from colonial and neocolonial experiences. It calls for state action even as it promotes local self-reliance, reinforcing the nation-state at the same time it reinforces transnational solidarities.

Green Mountain Localvores: A Long Way from Mao’s Red Guard?

‘Food sovereignty’ among farmers and activists in Vermont may not be directly associated with class struggle or state intervention, or even with Vía Campesina, as it is in the Larzac movement. Indeed, social and political actors are more likely to speak about food democracy than sovereignty, or in terms of local food systems. The scale of resistance is smaller and involves for many a proactive response to the imminent chaos associated with accelerating climate
change, US imperial overstretch, and economic collapse. Moreover, Vermon ters are not immune to the pop culture ‘return to the local’ as it has been increasingly highlighted nationally in a variety of settings, from the new organic garden on the White House lawn (Martin, 2009), to left-leaning blogs and publications such as The Nation and Yes! Magazine, from Michael Pollan’s (2008) In Defense of Food to Barbara Kingsolver’s (2008) Animal, Vegetable, Miracle. However, food sovereignty has analytical resonance across Vermont more directly through a mix of narratives similar to those targeting multinational agribusiness practices in the Larzac region of France, including fears over GMO seed contamination and state collusion with globalization.

The Vermont reaction also shares with that of the Larzac movement a desire to protect unique local culture against large market forces and the blandness of suburban life. Contentious, claims-making activity in Vermont around food sovereignty, then, is similar to the French but strikingly different as it mirrors the sort of underappreciated micro-level anti-globalization activity often overshadowed by global summitry protests, invocations of state authority, and the overtly transnational organizing like that in Larzac. In an analysis that links local action to anti-globalization contention, Armory Starr and Jason Adams (2003) point out the importance of a local food cycle in the form of co-operatives, farmer’s markets, community bartering, and the establishment of local currencies. Additional acts of resistance to corporate agriculture that they document—‘slow food’, urban gardening projects, permaculture, purchasing food when it is ‘in season’, and agricultural land reform—have been taken up by Vermonters across the state, albeit out of sight from the sorts of mega-protests covered by the national or international media (McDermott, 2007).

At the same time, however, there has been considerable room in Vermont for the development of a grassroots rebellion in defense of food nurtured by a political and cultural tradition that has for centuries emphasized small-scale frugality, local citizenship, and direct democracy. This sense that Vermont remains distinct pervades contemporary culture across the state: the first to ban all commercial billboard advertisement along its roads; the last to have a Wal-Mart; the only one never visited by former US President George W. Bush; represented for over a decade in the US House of Representatives, and now in the US Senate, by a self-proclaimed independent socialist; the largest city is nicknamed the People’s Republic of Burlington. Vermont today is experiencing a quirky, albeit not widely known, movement to secede and form the Second Vermont Republic.

Beyond this independent-mindedness, Vermont in more recent decades has developed a social infrastructure that would prove especially hospitable to the ideas diffused through the food sovereignty movement. Vermont was an early destination in the ‘back-to-the-land-movement’ attracting those hippies and others embracing the 1960s’ counterculture and later the ‘voluntary simplicity movement,’ as well as modern day local food homesteaders and ‘downshifters’ seeking escape from the stresses of modern life (Blumenthal & Mosteller, 2008). The Institute for Social Ecology (ISE) in Marshfield is an activist-education and research center in the vanguard of ecological approaches to food production, holding summer workshops to provide first-hand experience in organic gardening, eco-feminism, and alternative technologies. Founders and students of the ISE played important roles from the 1980s in Green political organizing across the US, and more recently in global justice, anti-capitalist protests, and in mobilizing opposition to GMOs through the ISE Biotechnology Project (Tokar, 2008).

Farmers and rural activists in Vermont clearly and vocally identify with the goals of Via Campesina as well as with the plight generally of small farmers facing both global market forces and industrial agriculture. Many of the ways in which food sovereignty has become a collective
action frame in Vermont demonstrates that the concept is appropriated differently within local environments: there is not an advanced, durable, or tightly integrated connective tissue linking the Larzac peasants and Vermont activists in a cross-national social movement per se, but there is still a higher degree of domestic–international fusion in cross-national references that encourage food sovereignty to resonate in these different settings.

**Rural Vermont and the Diffusion of the Food Sovereignty Frame**

In some ways similar to the mediating role played by the French Confédération Paysanne, Rural Vermont is affiliated through the National Family Farm Coalition with Vía Campesina, and the organization’s actions and organizing principles draw from the same chords of concern and resistance as Vía Campesina, though distinctly American in flavor:

> Our vision is for a Vermont local food system which is self-reliant and based on reverence for the earth … Economic justice for family farmers is the foundation of a healthy rural economy. Towards this end we strive for fair prices for farmers and we work to counter corporate consolidation of agriculture and the food supply.⁹

While Rural Vermont does not have a spokesperson as internationally known as José Bové, it nonetheless has been recognized by Vía Campesina and the non-governmental organization Grassroots International as ‘leading efforts at the local level to build legal and organizing capacity for food sovereignty initiatives’ (Grassroots International, 2008). Moreover, Rural Vermont’s national affiliations have facilitated the diffusion of collective action frames and tactics, and it has embraced similar targets and campaigns with Vía Campesina, encouraging mobilizations and contentious food politics in support of rural farmers and against multinational corporations and trade and investment deals. These solidarity actions in conjunction with Vía Campesina have included such ‘Global Days of Action’ as an April 2004 event in which over 50 Canadian and American farmers rallied at the Quebec–Vermont border to mark the 17th International Day of Farmers’ Struggle. ‘We are here at the border to demonstrate the global solidarity of farmers in the face of corporate globalization,’ said Burlington farmer Hillary Martin, amidst a collection of puppets, signs, and a large banner hung from an interstate overpass that read ‘No to Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)’ in English, French, and Spanish (Common Dreams, 2004). A Vía Campesina Global Day of Action in January 2008 encouraged Rural Vermont to organize ‘HEMP week’.¹⁰ In addition to direct advocacy, Rural Vermont lobbies for policies favorable to local farmers and markets, and engages in such micro-level actions as a ‘Bioimperialism and Food Sovereignty’ speaking tour and a ‘hot chocolate social’ in 2007 under the theme ‘Farmers and Consumers Unite to Strengthen Local Food Systems’ (Rural Vermont, 2009).

Through its advocacy and education campaigns, Rural Vermont is in solidarity with farmers around the world in resisting corporate agribusiness, and has consciously viewed Vía Campesina and food sovereignty as models for Vermont agriculture and activism. Rural Vermont’s then Program Director, Linda Setchell (2005) has written of the parallels between the struggles of Vermont dairies and farmers in the developing world in the face of ‘chemically-dependent agriculture of the 20th century which is not only environmentally destructive it’s also economically unsustainable’. She notes an 81% decline in the number of Vermont dairy farms between 1964 and 2004, and links this to the ‘increasing corporate control of the food supply, whether it is consolidation of processing facilities into the hands of a few, the dumping of cheap commodities or the subsidizing of factory farming at the federal level’ (Ibid.). Setchell then compares Rural
Vermont’s vision to that of Vía Campesina, detailing the latter’s food sovereignty principles and linking the agribusiness model and the WTO and FTAA-style agreements to the destruction of local control and markets (Ibid.).

One incident illustrates this direct relational link between Rural Vermont and Vía Campesina: in September 2001, Rural Vermont hosted the ‘Fertile Ground Festival’ under the theme, ‘The World is Not for Sale’, with invited guest José Bové speaking on the Vermont state house lawn in Montpelier on the theme ‘Reclaiming our Food and Our Future’. More often and despite a formal association, the link is more non-relational through primarily Internet-diffused claims, ideas, and targets around food sovereignty and against corporate agribusiness that resonate and take hold in the politically and culturally receptive setting statewide.

Vermont as the Epicenter of the Defense of the Commons

Beyond direct comparisons between Rural Vermont and Confédération Paysanne, including the strategic actions, targeting, and framing inspired by Vía Campesina, Vermont, possibly more than any other state in the US, has a decentralized political environment extremely conducive to the transplantation of an informal ethic supportive of food sovereignty. Brian Tokar has written that a sustainable future of genuine food sovereignty may work well with traditions of self-reliance and working collaboratively with one’s neighbors, which are less pronounced in other regions of the US today. Writes Tokar:

Vermonters are very concerned about the quality of our food, and share a concern and identification with those who grow our food that has been all but obliterated in much of the U.S. In this respect, by moving toward a more conscious culture with respect to food, Vermont may have more in common with Europe than almost any other place in the U.S. (Tokar, 2006)

In 2005, for example, an ethos of self-reliance was embraced by a small group of women in Vermont’s Upper Valley, who ate only local food for a month. A local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm, Luna Bleu, provided much of the food, as did the local Upper Valley Co-op. In the past several years since, a wider food movement inspired by their actions—localvores—has spread across the state as hundreds of Vermonters have accepted the ‘Eat Local’ challenge, from large groups in the cities of Burlington, Montpelier, Rutland, and Brattleboro to only a small handful of participants in smaller villages (McDermott, 2007). Another indication of this ethos, Vermont today has the most farmers markets per capita in the US, and ranks first in the US in per capita direct sales from farmers to consumers (Calta, 2008). As well, many Vermont schools have active food gardens and horticulture programs, while winter farmer’s markets have begun to flourish in smaller cities such as Burlington and Montpelier as well.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture has since 2003 become much more active in promoting a ‘Buy Local Campaign’. It distributed large inserts in statewide newspapers in 2007, promoting dozens of farm stands and farmers markets as well as listing ‘10 Great Reasons to Buy Local’. The State’s campaign concluded that if ‘Vermonters shifted just 10 percent of their food purchases to locally grown food products, (this) would add more than $100 million to Vermont’s economy’ (Vermont, 2008; Johnson, 2007). The Vermont Fresh Network fosters direct relationships between farmers, food producers, and chefs (Vermont, 2007) that contribute to a more vibrant local food system. Diners can locate the green Vermont Fresh Network sign and support the Buy Local effort when eating in participating restaurants. And the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont has been promoting local farms through educational programming since 1971.
Vermont’s largest city is well-known for a citizenry committed to the availability of local food. From ‘freegans’ dumpster-diving for thrown out restaurant food, to Burlington Bread, an attempt at a local currency, from the prevalence of organic community potlucks and peace groups such as the Burlington chapter of ‘Food not Bombs’, to the three different farmer’s markets held weekly in the city, Burlington actively resists corporate agribusiness (Kohut, 2007). The large co-operative, City Market, supports locally grown foods, and carries over 1,000 Vermont-made products, accounting for 73% of the vendors on the store's shelves. Members and volunteers from City Market are involved in a number of programs across Burlington, including a ‘Going Local Colloquium’, the School Food Project (where local students are educated on the benefits of local food), an annual harvest festival, and the Lunch with Neighbors senior meal program. The Intervale Center holds over 100 acres adjacent to the middle of the city, hosting 13 independent organic farms and 4 CSA farms, and contributing to a widely embraced ethic of sustainability and local-centeredness in and around the greater Burlington area (Intervale, 2007).

Despite or because of its geographic isolation, Vermont is at the center of an ethical renaissance relating to food sovereignty though the localvore movement and small-scale farming. Evolving micro-mobilization efforts suggest a turn towards what some call more meaningful work instead of confrontation, where the large-scale mass protests of the Seattle WTO era are exchanged for a longer-term constructive agenda based on small-scale acts against a broken, global capitalist food system afflicted by E. Coli, Salmonella, and an atomizing and alienating production and distribution system. Matt Kopka has recently written on food sovereignty’s ‘radical insistence on community, on the development of a “defensible life space” against neoliberalism’s enclosure of the commons’ (Kopka, 2008, p. 46). This description aptly describes the product of the multiple small actions and micro-encounters with local food and farmers on the part of Vermonters who have been increasingly insisting on the importance of preserving their distinctive way of life, food supply, and independence from neoliberal policy constraints.

Conclusion: The Tensions in the Local while Bridging with the Global

The diverse meaning of food sovereignty provokes tensions that challenge local social and political organizing. The response in Larzac emphasizes organizing among peasants as producers in ways that delayed a consumer response to commodity-based food system. While class solidarity provided an organizational backbone to challenge both national and global institutions and to support global alliances, only more recently have the French begun to develop the burgeoning organic food movement we see in the US, nor has class organizing enabled localvore habits popularized in English- and French-speaking America. Today, French consumption remains largely reliant on industrial practices and agricultural commercialization, while an emerging counter movement has just begun to take root in the cities like Paris, with its new organic cooperatives as well as flashy natural markets similar to America’s Whole Foods. Given the nature of class organizing, urban movements often are structured as support for the peasant struggle without a real calling as consumers in their own right.

With its focus on individual or community autonomy and away from the state, food sovereignty in the US risks marginalization as an elite practice that undercuts the message of social change required of a global movement. California, dependent on history’s largest and most energy intensive water distribution system, has made the desert bloom and fostered an easy luxury of localvore abundance often ignorant of the environmental costs of the system. In Vermont, young farmer-entrepreneurs have turned to value added production like artisan...
cheeses and specialty vegetables to spur local economies. At the same time, they have risked the exacerbation of generational, class, and gender cleavages in rural communities by, on the one hand, embracing a language of capitalism that irks earlier back-to-landers as it also diminishes the contributions of those first organic farmers, and on the other, talking in a discourse of rural salvation that mischaracterizes rural communities as desperate (Hewitt, 2010). 

Nonetheless, we remain convinced that local food sovereignty offers a counterweight to global agribusiness, providing real and analytically important bridges between local and global responses to neoliberalism. While trade and investment institutions, treaties, and multinational corporations have contributed to the diminishment and reformulation of sovereignty, these changes enable resistance to the perceived loss of sovereignty, creating new spaces, opportunities, and targets for cross-border campaigns and transnational movements. While local resistance is much less documented or understood, its practitioners are responding to the same fears, targeting the same policies, and grasping similar frames as those engaged in well-documented transnational campaigns against institutions of global governance and neoliberal trade.

Food sovereignty movements operate at a plurality of social and political scales, from the local grassroots, to the national and the global. Diverse strategies are used at multiple levels to challenge states, multinational corporations, and multilateral trade institutions including the WTO that perpetuate commodified food systems. Thus, since, as Barry Gills (2004) suggests, there are many globalizations and therefore many possible alternatives, local resistance that appropriates meanings surrounding food sovereignty links local and global, offering insights into alternative practices that seek to secede from the unsustainable global capitalist model of mass consumption and unlimited growth.

Food sovereignty campaigns in Larzac and Vermont may seem different despite similar origins in the 1960s. While both locales emphasize local control and community cohesion, the Larzac movement and French activism in general remains embedded in class and global social solidarity, and Vermonters prioritize environmental and organic practices that sustain ‘freegans’ and Community Support Agriculture as microresistance to global agribusiness. Both cases illustrate how food sovereignty is differently appropriated in local settings, where individuals and groups have embraced it for more unique and domestically shaped acts of contention. Thus, ‘alter-globalization’ is misapplied when the single focus is large-scale mobilizations, as smaller, micro-encounters and localized responses are part of a broader and more nuanced process of transnational diffusion of resistances, struggles, and reformulations over sovereignty at multiple political and social scales.

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Notes

1 Statement on People’s Food Sovereignty Via Campesina, available at http://www.foodfirst.org/wto/foodsovereignty.php
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