



Anthropological Forum

A Journal of Social Anthropology and Comparative Sociology

ISSN: 0066-4677 (Print) 1469-2902 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/canf20>

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To cite this article: Graeme MacRae (2016) Food Sovereignty and the Anthropology of Food: Ethnographic Approaches to Policy and Practice, Anthropological Forum, 26:3, 227-232, DOI: [10.1080/00664677.2016.1201456](https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2016.1201456)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2016.1201456>



Published online: 16 Sep 2016.



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Food Sovereignty and the Anthropology of Food: Ethnographic Approaches to Policy and Practice

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ABSTRACT

This introduction discusses the theoretical and methodological basis of the articles in the special issue: 'Food Sovereignty and the Anthropology of Food: Ethnographic Approaches to Policy and Practice'. Firstly, it argues a need for an ongoing anthropology of food, grounded in ethnographic studies at various points in supply chains. Secondly, it foregrounds an inherent similarity of approach between the thinking and methods of the Food Sovereignty movement, on the one hand, and anthropology, on the other.

KEYWORDS

Anthropology; food security;
food sovereignty; food policy;
food systems

Anthropological interest in food goes back a long way, but it has ebbed and flowed with changes of emphasis and style. In 2002, Sidney Mintz and Christine du Bois, reviewing this history, identified several main themes in the modern (post-1980s) anthropology of food, of which one was 'food insecurity'. However, they also concluded that the job was far from complete and that while 'anthropologists are in a good position to make useful contributions to food policy ... they have not taken full advantage of this opportunity' (Mintz and Du Bois 2002, 111). A few years earlier Johan Pottier (1999, vii) had likewise identified food security as a global issue to which much policy was directed, but which was often not well grounded in bottom-up understandings of the foodscapes of those at whom it was ostensibly aimed. This, he argued, was an opportunity for anthropology to (re)establish and (re)affirm its relevance to the pressing challenges of the contemporary world (Pottier 1999, 7–10). The term 'food sovereignty' does not appear in either of these works, but it was by this time already well established in activist discourse as a counter-model to top-down approaches to food security.

Since then globalisation of the world's food systems has continued apace, food security has become an issue of international concern, debates about food policy have intensified and food sovereignty has gained much wider currency as a counter-discourse to that of food security. Within anthropology work on food has burgeoned and diversified, with increasing attention to the food security–sovereignty–policy nexus.

The articles collected here began as papers at a panel on Food Sovereignty organised by Thomas Reuter at the annual conference of the Australian Anthropological Society, held at the Australian National University in November 2013. The subtitle 'local and global solutions to human survival under deteriorating climatic conditions' stressed the relevance

and indeed urgency of anthropological attention to food. While we saw this relationship between food policy and practice as a fallow field awaiting urgent anthropological cultivation, similar seeds were being sown across the world at the same moment. The most significant of these was a pair of conferences organised by the Yale Agrarian Studies Program and the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague shortly before and after ours.¹ These led to special issues of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* (Edelman et al. 2014), *Third World Quarterly* (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2015) and *Globalisations* (Shattuck et al. 2015) focusing and analysing debate on Food Sovereignty and taking it to a new level by exploring complexities and contradictions in the discourse and practice of Food Sovereignty.

At the core of these debates are: firstly, questions about the costs and benefits of the industrialisation, globalisation and corporatisation of food production and distribution systems; secondly, interpretations of the nature, extent and causes of present food (in) security/ies around the world; thirdly, the most appropriate strategies for meeting the undeniable challenges of future food provisioning at local, national and global levels; and, finally, the crisis of rural/agrarian decline and distress, especially in poorer parts of the world. All four questions are the subject of deeply polarised debate. On the one side is a view, shared by multinational food corporations, an international network of research institutions and international agencies such as the World Bank, FAO and INFAD, and implemented by many national governments, that the only realistic path to future food security is through large-scale, high-tech, input-intensive, industrial agricultural methods combined with a global system of procurement and distribution managed by capitalist enterprise. On the other side is a vision, shared largely by local communities, organisations of small farmers and consumers, NGOs and academic researchers not affiliated to the international agri-food research system, of a global food system built from the bottom up – of multiple agricultural systems and food cultures built on the foundation of local ecologies and communities (Uphoff 2002, 8–9; Schanbacher 2010, 25). Food security is a core concept in the former view, while food sovereignty has become so in the latter, and in the process both have picked up increasing loads of ideological baggage.

These two ‘food-world-views’ often appear worlds apart, and their proponents routinely talk past each other (Perfecto et al. 2009, 6, 7; Pritchard et al. 2014, 59). One reason for this is that their views and analyses of food systems begin from different levels and scales. National policy and global markets look different when viewed from the bottom up (as Vel, McCarthy and Zen (this issue) illustrate), while local food traditions look different when viewed from the level of global distribution systems or national policy. While there is no shortage of research at both ends of this scale, there is surprisingly little that combines or integrates these disparate levels and scales of analysis. Consequently, the proponents of the debates appear often to have little common ground from which to even begin talking.

Less evident, though, is work that spans across modes and levels of analysis: combining cultural approaches with political-economic ones, or viewing policy through the lens of local ethnographic studies. Such studies can begin from either end of the scale. Top-down thinking and political-economic interests are implemented by way of policies and markets that are variously received, experienced, ignored, suffered or resisted at the grass-roots level, both by producers and consumers of food. Conversely, from the

bottom-up, individuals and communities respond to local and macro-level constraints and opportunities, often in innovative and creative ways.

This collection contributes to the task of filling this gap by providing anthropologically conceived and ethnographically driven investigations of global and national processes, policies, organisations and discourses as they intersect with the lives of local communities.

We seek to articulate the shifting and often uneasy relationships between local food practices and the larger political-economic contexts in which they operate. These larger contexts are themselves defined by tensions between market forces and the interventions of policy. At the three corners of this triangle (market, policy and local practice), we find motivations of commercial interest, but also discourses and strategies recognisable (whether named or not) as ‘food security’ and ‘food sovereignty’.

Food sovereignty is a comprehensive ideology and set of practices seeking to rejoin production, distribution and consumption or, as Perfecto et al. (2009, 211) put it, to combine ‘ecological’, ‘agricultural’ and ‘social movement’ arguments, but from the bottom up – at the level of local ecologies and communities. The most widely agreed definition is that from the first International Food Sovereignty Forum in Nyéléni, Mali, in 2007 as ‘the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems’ (Nyéléni 2015), which is in turn based on La Via Campesina’s pioneering definition a year earlier at the World Food Summit in Rome. The concept was developed explicitly as a critique of, and alternative to, top-down globalised models of ‘food security’ – but also as a practical way of addressing the consequences of global processes by way of local action. However, food sovereignty is also ‘good to think with’ – as a model for critical analysis of food problems at all levels. In this sense we see food sovereignty’s praxis of holistic/systemic analysis by way of locally grounded action as deeply anthropological, on the one hand mirroring the practice of ethnography and on the other modelling an engaged anthropology of food.

Furthermore, as soon as we interrogate these discourses and strategies, we are reminded that ‘food’ is in itself a complex category – a system of systems, spanning phases from production to consumption (and waste) and thus inevitably embedded in broader frameworks of livelihood endeavours and cultural understandings. It is this awareness of and focus on integration and embeddedness that, once again, anthropology shares with food sovereignty thinking.

While the tensions between security and sovereignty approaches to food problems and between levels of analysis provide conceptual and methodological anchors for our papers, what we seek to add here is a focus on the ways in which they articulate in practice. More specifically, what our papers share is the common ground between anthropology and food sovereignty – what David Mosse (2008), writing of development rather than food and citing Rosalind Eyben, has described as ‘a certain way of constructing and analysing problems and reflecting on the wider social and cultural context ... critically engaging with the dilemmas of power and knowledge that shape the ... system’. We focus on the ways in which food sovereignty thinking, like the movement itself, explicitly spans, links and addresses the gap between the levels of policy and practice, national and global processes and local communities.

All of the papers here span these levels in one way or another – from the (inter)national to the ethnographic – showing how higher-level process work themselves out in the

‘friction’ (Tsing 2005) of engagement with local communities and livelihoods. They also demonstrate the food sovereignty principle of providing global level insights, as well as practical action, from a base of local communities and economies. This demonstration of the value of bottom-up ethnographic approaches is important, but perhaps even more so is this linking of levels, and attention to linkages, which we see as bringing a distinctively anthropological approach to the topic.

While ethnography is obviously central to our understanding of the relationship between food sovereignty and the anthropology of food, we are aware that ethnography itself can no longer be taken as an unproblematic element of anthropology (Ingold 2008, 2014; Forsey 2010). While there is much with which to agree in Tim Ingold’s critique of the misuses of ‘ethnography’, arbitrary distinctions between ‘theory’ and ‘method’, ‘research’ and ‘teaching’, we do not subscribe to his radical distinction between anthropology and ethnography, let alone scepticism about its value, which begins with his reduction of ethnography to written description, denial of its status as practice and replacement by, ‘participant observation’. However, ironically, much of what he (rightly) says about anthropology and participant observation applies equally to what many of us understand as ethnography. This is not the place for an extended engagement with Ingold’s argument, but, briefly, what the articles collected here demonstrate is an anthropology neither separate from, reducible to, nor devoid of ethnography, but which lies in the more or less seamless process of mutual informing of understandings across spatial scales and levels of abstraction.

Our papers are located across the Asia-Pacific region, from the western Himalayas to the south Pacific and they address the key areas of intersection between policy and local communities, high-level ideas of food security and local concerns with food sovereignty in different ways. They also demonstrate a range of distinctly anthropological approaches to food system analysis.

The first article, by Jacqueline Vel, John McCarthy and Zen Zahari, begins from the level of policy, providing a nuanced and powerful critique of the internal contradictions that inevitably confound even the best-intentioned constellations of food and agriculture policies. These are illustrated through case studies of tensions between local subsistence production and top-down plans for cash cropping of oil palm and sugar in local communities at opposite ends of the Indonesian archipelago. The article demonstrates how the various aspects of food security are incorporated into the Indonesian Food Act and how food sovereignty is associated with national self-sufficiency rather than with households in the rural areas. Contrasting national policy narratives with food policy problems in the food-producing areas, the paper concludes that addressing food insecurity requires shifting from national targets to addressing local food security dilemmas.

Ramesh Sunam and Jagannath Adhikari begin from the opposite end of the scale – the grounded realities of rural communities – but likewise proceed through comparison from two different ecological zones of Nepal. They document and analyse the complex patterns of unevenly distributed gains and losses created by extensive out-migration of labour. These have led to new patterns of livelihood strategies, including a partial retreat from agriculture in the local economies of home communities left behind by labour migrants. While the overall poverty has declined, and food security has in some respects improved, this has been at the price of loss of local agricultural capacity and food sovereignty.

Graeme MacRae’s essay is grounded in a critical review of the mixed results of technical and economic transformations of agricultural systems in north India, but then identifies a

survival of traditional (pre-Green Revolution) agricultural systems in the mountains. It argues, as do local communities and NGOs, for the revival of such systems as models for an alternative agricultural development based less on national food security policy and more on local food sovereignties. As with Suman and Adhikari's article, it is important to recognise that rural livelihoods are not only agricultural, and this paper concludes with an argument for expansion of food sovereignty into a more inclusive concept of livelihood sovereignty.

The next paper, by Wakako Takeda, Cathy Banwell and Jane Dixon, returns to the tension between policy and practice, but shifts focus from the production to the consumption end of the food system. It relates the story of a bottom-up movement in Japan toward locally produced, healthy 'traditional food' in which principles of food sovereignty are recognisable. However, this impulse has since been hijacked by government and converted into a policy of what might be described as 'culinary citizenship'. In the process its collective and cultural dimensions have been reduced to individualised prescriptions for good eating habits and proper family meals, but the original impulse has been reborn in the form of young urbanites using their leisure to rediscover their national food culture by weekend work on farms.

Finally, far from the circuits of global food sovereignty discourse, and in a predominantly urbanised economy similar in some ways to Japan, albeit more globalised, Isa Ritchie records the emergence, in a small town in the post-agrarian rural landscape of New Zealand, of a set of ideas and practices about food production, distribution and consumption that bear many of the hallmarks of food sovereignty, but without the name.

What we suggest here is a methodological convergence between the locally grounded bottom-up approaches and the systemic thinking, research and practice across scales that characterise both food sovereignty and anthropology. This special issue illustrates what this can mean both for food policy and for the anthropology of food.

Note

1. http://www.iss.nl/research/research_programmes/political_economy_of_resources_environment_and_population_per/networks/critical_agrarian_studies_icas/food_sovereignty_a_critical_dialogue/.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Jacqueline Vel and Greg Acciaioli for help with this introduction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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