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## Mexican-Origin Foods, Foodways, and Social Movements

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## CHAPTER 1

# Autonomía and Food Sovereignty

## Decolonization across the Food Chain

DEVON G. PEÑA

The principles of food sovereignty are associated with an influential global movement and a subject of considerable activist and scholarly discussion. These discourses have much ground left to cover, especially from the standpoint of decolonial theory and the critique of white settler colonialism.<sup>1</sup> Studies of the food sovereignty movement are yet to adequately address some unsettled epistemological and ontological questions posed by *decoloniality*.<sup>2</sup> My approach questions the concept of *sovereignty* itself by means of a critical analysis of the principles embraced by the most prominent advocate of food sovereignty, La Via Campesina (LVC). I focus on silences and implicit acceptance of suspect paradigms in the articulation of concepts of human rights, governmentality, and sustainability in the human-environment relationship: LVC's conceptualization of sovereignty remains bound to Western concepts of human rights; it traverses onto the terrain of the unique prospects and challenges involved in tribal "sovereignty versus autonomy" disputes in First Nations; and it fails to challenge the state of *economic* exception that subjects human and more-than-human beings to unabated ecological violence alongside surveillance, compliance, compulsion, and incitement to dispossession unleashed under neoliberal environmental rationalities, or *environmentality*.<sup>3</sup>

LVC's prominent declaration on food sovereignty presents "dominionist" and "exceptionalist" subject positions that limit and perhaps even rule out the possibility of a politics of *coevalness* among humans, other organisms, and ecosystems. Giorgio Agamben's notion

of the “anthropological machine” defines this as the source of the hierarchy of human exceptionalism because it produces a divide between human and animal that subordinates the latter to the former. I depart from Agamben by rejecting the idea that the genealogy of the concept of the anthropological machine necessarily always leads back to an originary binary. I instead propose the following: Despite pretensions, the Western originary binary lacks status as a universal naturalized object. Most Indigenous cultures conceptualize plants and animals as coevals and teachers; sentient landscapes are respected as sources of knowledge and agency.<sup>4</sup> This leads to different results, departing company with anthropocentric concepts of sovereignty. The former reduces other species and organisms to “bare life” by miscasting these as “non-subjects” stripped of the political, social, and legal standing granted citizens.<sup>5</sup> I seek to extend Mick Smith’s argument that “the reduction of the world to a standing reserve . . . reduce[s] humans to the status of the ‘bare life’ . . . [and] constitutes the ‘hidden matrix’ of contemporary (bio)politics.” I agree with Smith on how “the natural world is precisely where the state of exception originally takes the form of the rule.” This certainly pertains where the “dominant modern Western philosophical and political traditions are concerned.”<sup>6</sup> Smith does not address how this may unfold in the conflict between Indigenous and Western philosophical and social systems, but the argument can be extended to pivotal silences in food sovereignty discourses. We can then clear a way for decolonial principles guiding actual biopolitical practices in Indigenous place-based and other communities of resistance. For me, Zapatista decolonial concepts of *autonomía* (Indigenous autonomy) provide a more widely resonating framework for struggles integrating food sovereignty with decolonial and indigenizing methods.<sup>7</sup>

## The Limits and Contradictions of Food Sovereignty: Five Critical Dimensions

The principles of food sovereignty were first articulated in a declaration issued by LVC as a global peasant farmers’ movement.<sup>8</sup> The statement of foundational principles was released in November 2001. Here is the preamble:

People's Food Sovereignty is a Right. In order to guarantee the independence and food sovereignty of all of the world's peoples, it is essential that food be produced through diversified, farmer-based production systems. Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to define their own agriculture and food policies, 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, and to restrict the dumping of products in their markets. Food sovereignty does not negate trade, but rather, it promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production.<sup>9</sup>

This preamble is followed by eleven principles presented for the realization of the political goals of food sovereignty (see sidebar). These principles were later reformulated in the Declaration of Nyéléni adopted in February 2007 and so named for the site of the gathering at Nyéléni Village, Sélingué, Mali, Africa. This document is formally titled *Declaration of the Forum for Food Sovereignty, Nyéléni 2007*, and not all participants in the drafting were LVC affiliates. The Nyéléni declaration reflects profound shifts in the reframing of food sovereignty and draws a sharp contrast by emphasizing Indigenous resistance to patriarchy in food systems and insipid links to the continuing structural violence of capitalist enclosures in the current wave of global land grabs. (I will address the Nyéléni declaration in future work.)

One of the accomplishments of the food sovereignty movement has been to influence the framing of the mandate followed by the UN Special Rapporteur, who offers this definition of the right to food:

[T]he right to food is the right to have regular, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensure a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear.<sup>10</sup>

Recent commentary on the Special Rapporteurs visits to Canada—where Olivier De Schutter (and later Anaya, the Special Rapporteur

## La Via Campesina Principles of Food Sovereignty

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The eleven original Principles of Food Sovereignty adopted in 2001 by La Via Campesina deemed critical to the realization of the movement's political goals:

1. The right of all countries to protect their domestic markets by regulating all imports; which undermine their food sovereignty;
2. Trade rules that support and guarantee food sovereignty;
3. Upholding gender equity and equality in all policies and practices concerning food production;
4. The precautionary principle;
5. The right to information about the origin and content of food items;
6. Genuine international democratic participation mechanisms;
7. Priority to domestic food production, sustainable farming practices and equitable access to all resources;
8. Support for small farmers and producers to own, and have sufficient control over means of food production;
9. An effective ban on all forms of dumping in order to protect domestic food production; this would include supply management by exporting countries to avoid surpluses and the rights of importing countries to protect internal markets against imports at low prices;
10. Prohibition of biopiracy and patents on living matter—animals, plants, the human body and other life forms—and any of its components, including the development of sterile varieties through genetic engineering;
11. Respect for all human rights conventions and related multilateral agreements under independent international jurisdiction.

Source: La Via Campesina 2001.

on Indigenous Rights) expressed concern over the “deep and severe food insecurity faced by aboriginal peoples across Canada”—led Native critics to point to prolonged discontent in Indigenous public discourse over the “imagery of a white man pronouncing upon indigenous issues.”<sup>11</sup>

While sympathetic to most of the original 2001 principles, I have concerns over how some have resulted in the occlusion and silencing of important decolonial ethical principles and political claims. This

includes misrecognizing resurgent alterNative epistemologies rooted in multigenerational Indigenous knowledge of the human-ecology nexus.<sup>12</sup> These missing elements involve principles that are indispensable to environmental and food justice movements and directly negate the privileging of white settler colonial *dispositifs* (governmental apparatuses, habitus) and human-centered economic systems. AlterNative epistemologies privilege Earth's ecosystems as originary sources of right livelihoods and as teachers of the rules of place-based living.

I read the principles outlined by LVC (see sidebar) as a narrative trapped within a neoliberal capitalist epistemology of the environment and labor. In this formulation human rights are still ultimately subject to the alienation of human and more-than-human entities under the spell of the commodity form. As a result, LVC's "brand" has been left open to abuse wherever affiliates reproduce the privileges of petite bourgeoisie worldviews amid the mass of legitimate struggles by precarious farmers. The 2001 LVC food sovereignty declaration avoids explicitly *anticapitalist* statements. It is critical of corporate power and industrial agribusinesses, including the biotechnology "Gene Giants," but fails to address the deeper problems inherent to the capitalist regime imposed under neoliberal investor-state trade treaties. These enclosures impinge on territories *and* local democratic spaces targeted for dismantling by neoliberal globalists. This also reflects unresolved divisions inside LVC between smallholder subsistence-oriented farmers and larger, more market- and trade-oriented commercial farmers who claim, often without proof, that they too embrace social and environmental justice ethics and standards in pursuit of "sustainable agriculture."<sup>13</sup> According to one gentle criticism of LVC, these problems stem from a lack of "class analysis" and tendencies toward "unnecessary localism."<sup>14</sup> The critical reading presented here focuses attention on five unresolved contradictions or ambiguities evident in the 2001 declaration. This involves criticism of a framework that

1. accepts and promotes Western concepts of human rights;
2. remains bound to anthropocentric forms of governmental or state sovereignty;
3. fails to recognize and engage in the active defense of the ecological and economic base services associated with

Indigenous and other traditional agroecosystems subjected to neoliberal enclosures and dispossession;

4. fails to understand how the precautionary principle is rendered largely irrelevant given the state of agricultural biopolitics and biotechnology today, a situation requiring active support for and commitment to a restoration ecology paradigm; and
5. remains uncritically committed to the “sustainability” agenda and overlooks the rise of more revolutionary confrontations with the neoliberal logic of the capitalist regime; one especially significant dimension of all these issues is bound up with LVC’s failure to address the rise of urban food justice movements across the food chain.

## 1. ACCEPTANCE OF WESTERNIZED CONCEPTS OF UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS

LVC claims to promote Indigenous rights, but the original food sovereignty principles failed to clarify the differences between distinctly Western (US-led) approaches to human rights and Indigenous precepts governing all our relations. The concept of “universal human rights” has been criticized as a “Trojan horse” of neoliberal design and “recolonization” masquerading as respect for Indigenous peoples.<sup>15</sup> The framing of human rights under the rubric of Western nation-states, and to a more nuanced extent within the UN, has largely privileged “individual rights,” and these are actually too often reduced to property rights or limited appeals for due process and equal protection. This is certainly the US position, as was evident in the work of researchers with the US Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) during the infamous “Bowman Expeditions” that sought to “weaponize” cognitive maps in Indigenous territories of México to compel privatization of common property (*ejidos*).<sup>16</sup> All this unfolds while Indigenous discourses alternately work on transforming policies through the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and other forums.

In another sense, the problem resides in the very concept of the “individual.” A vital epistemological guidepost for me, following Shawn Wilson, is the Indigenous idea of *relational knowledge*.<sup>17</sup> This

principle is enunciated by a majority of the world's Indigenous languages that lack a word translating into "individual" let alone a legal concept that is the moral and juridical equivalent of the Western idea of a separate and autonomous (qua atomized) subject with specific rights and duties as defined by a sovereign power. Most Indigenous languages include words that translate to "person" or "human being," but these are typically coupled or nested within the epistemic tenet that to be human, to become a person, one must be in relation to others. Interconnection is being.<sup>18</sup> This is expressed in the Maya concept of "In Lak'ech" (You are my other me) and the Lakota concept of "Mitakuye oyasin" (All my relations), two well-known examples of AlterNative ways of knowing and being.

LVC needs to critically reflect on the epistemological challenges posed by questions over the definition of human rights, indigeneity, sustainability, equity, and the nature of the "market" and "trade." LVC should consider concepts posed by Indigenous peoples that articulate their enduring presence and voices from autonomous and collective philosophies of being. These must be understood as positions of radical subjectivity dead set against and actively delinked from the colonial politics of interpellation. This requires understanding how settler colonial intruders seek to trap Indigenous peoples within juridical and political narratives that insist we negotiate the conditions of our surrender and co-optation to the globalization demands of neoliberal capitalism. This is one among many "trickster" moves used to enact biopolitical control and impose an economic order based on hyper-individualism, disconnection, and self-aggrandizement. This configuration produces settler subjectivities willing to fulfill the role of presumably "telluric" partisans championing the cause of continued enclosure and dispossession of Indigenous territories.<sup>19</sup> Since it has a substantial global research apparatus, it would be useful for LVC to clarify its understanding of alterNative perspectives on so-called human rights. Decolonial delinking from Westernized precepts of human rights could inform the work of scholars of food sovereignty who rarely address the widespread but unstated epistemological influence of rational choice theories (RCT) in a barely visible and unholy union to establish a universal definition of homo oeconomicus in order to justify fundamentalist market extremism.<sup>20</sup>



The relationship between human rights and food sovereignty must be clarified through Indigenous voices because these enunciate their own conceptualizations of rights that lay well beyond the Western colonial emphasis on *individual* rights to possessions, due process, and equal protection. Indigenous cosmovisions and customary laws, results of *constitutive* power and the basis of actually existing autonomous polities, emphasize the principle of interrelationship including the first ethics of the obligation to take care of home places through mutual aid and social cooperation.<sup>21</sup> Misconstruing this to mean that Indigenous people neither deserve nor desire due process or equal protection is a grave error because First Peoples have autochthonous principles for organizing and implementing such matters especially within the spaces of institutional autonomy. This is not an essentialist or romanticist notion given the long arc of struggles against structural violence and historical trauma. It is a hotly contested process and *unrealized* political project in most Indigenous communities pursuing autonomy. There are no guarantees that the restoration of autonomy in pursuit of the fulfillment of obligations to all Earth communities can be fully realized,<sup>22</sup> and so these struggles remain salient features of movements coalescing around indigeneity and autonomy.

## 2. ACCEPTANCE OF SOVEREIGN (STATE) POWER AND ANTHROPOCENTRIC "DOMINIONISM."

Indigenous concepts of property are *relational*, and large bodies of customary law illustrate the designation of obligations to family, clan, village, or other groups holding use rights to specific territories. These embrace "Earth-care" obligations by forbidding abusive uses of the land, water, sea, and wildlife. These are originary rules for tenderly inhabiting place. Fulfillment of these ethics of Earth-care guarantee the exercise of future use rights. By invoking the so-called Seventh Generation Principle, these (home)land ethics avoid the white settler colonial subjectivity of "free riders." I have urged attention to these issues by informing environmental justice discourse on why principal Indigenous concepts of human rights are about respect for the capacity of communities to fulfill obligations as cohabitants following "Original Instructions"—understood here to involve respect for the agency of the Earth as the only true "plane of immanence" mani-

fested in the force and substance of matter independently asserting its *presence*.<sup>23</sup>

LVC should take a more cautious approach to the problem of sovereignty as exercised through neoliberal governmental rationalities that are behind new enclosures seeking to extend the dominion of late capitalist globalization and even relocalization. LVC does not address how neoliberal institutions co-opt the petite bourgeoisie ideology of the nouveau peasantry. There is internal reluctance to mobilize support for effective struggles *across the entire food chain* and in active defense of Indigenous ecosystems. In addition, the struggles against racialized environmental injustices continue to challenge the alternative, sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty movements and the corporate-dominated sectors alike. Neoliberal ideologies create spaces for some family farmers to feign progressive, nonexploitative relations with farmworkers, other food-chain workers, and the environment. LVC's faith in the ability of civil society to compel sovereign powers to adopt radical political transformation in response to grassroots demands is naive at best—for capital, food will always be a political weapon in the legal civil or class war.<sup>24</sup>

Food justice movements are smart to redirect political work away from excess engagement with neoliberal investor-state politics and focus on civil society networks and free associations. The Zapatistas have done this to dramatic effect in southeastern México. Food sovereignty activism can also redirect resources and community assets toward the task of *Indigenous self-valorization*—the rebuilding of our traditional agroecosystems and cooperative forms of “prosumption” in both rural and urban contexts to more effectively challenge the neoliberal corporate paradigm,<sup>25</sup> which cannot thrive in delinked spaces. This means refocusing on actually existing spaces of autonomy and the formal and informal networks of mutual aid and cooperative labor in Indigenous ancestral and diaspora-adopted territories.<sup>26</sup> LVC should explicitly challenge the existing state of economic exception and the “nonsubject” status of Indigenous peoples and the Earth itself. As the Zapatistas have said, describing the ethics of resistance to neoliberalism, “Here you can buy or sell anything except Indigenous dignity.”<sup>27</sup>

The LVC principles of food sovereignty commit a strategic error

by negotiating within the fields of power/knowledge imposed by neoliberals in their formulations of state sovereignty. Discussing “peoples’ right to food,” LVC declares that “*Governments must uphold the rights of all peoples to food sovereignty and security, and adopt policies that promote sustainable, family-farm based production rather than industry-led, high-input and export oriented production.*”<sup>28</sup> This appeal to benign governmental rationality is politically naive and glosses over the need for critiques of the assemblages and intersections of race, gender, class, national origin, heteronormative, species, and other structural inequities inhering to the investor-state nexus and of how these intrude on social collectivities, communities, and the associations of civil society. In the United States, numerous family farms in the alternative and sustainable agriculture movements pronounce themselves advocates of food sovereignty. Yet affiliates of LVC so far remain incapable of developing effective strategies against the notorious sites of continued patriarchal domination. Many farmers harbor reactionary and regressive attitudes toward farmworkers, women, and animals. State sovereign power is complicit in deregulating the constitution of these relations of domination and exploitation under the guise of sustainability.<sup>29</sup>

### 3. FAILURE TO FOCUS ON THE VALUE OF ECOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC BASE SERVICES

LVC’s principles of food sovereignty lack concern for struggles by Indigenous and other traditional smallholder farmers to revalue the ecological and economic base services provided by ethnoecological practices.<sup>30</sup> LVC food sovereignty advocates demand that people be able to produce their own food using agricultural methods that are appropriate to their time, place, and cultural traditions. However, what if these traditions are harmful to other members of the social and ecological community? What if other social actors, including the military, are disrupting and interfering with these practices? Situations can and do arise within dispossessed and “co-managed” territories in which presumed traditional farming systems are incompatible with the protection of native wild and agricultural biodiversity. Some LVC affiliates are engaged in monoculture production (e.g., coffee producers in México and Vietnam).<sup>31</sup> These farmers contribute to the decline of

farmland as habitat and refuge and reproduce the patterns of exploitation many denounce as the sins of corporate monocultures.<sup>32</sup>

Traditional farmers often represent new generations of incoming displaced rural workers or subsistence farmers seeking refuge from encounters with enclosures in other locales. Many remain landless and are not seeking to produce local foods and are instead unwitting participants in the environmental violence of unequal geographies of development. Food sovereignty advocates need to address this by clearly identifying and defining the sociopolitical conditions and agroecological practices under which Indigenous and other place-based communities can continue to provide services to ecosystems that protect biodiversity in both rural and urban locales. This requires appraisal of the differences between established and incoming smallholder farmers. Many advocates uncritically focus only on *localizing* production without fully considering varying impacts on native biodiversity, wildlife habitat, and landscape ecologies in the struggles for Indigenous heritage subsistence rights. LVC is concerned with protecting the diversity of landrace and heirloom crop varieties. It does so directly by calling for the protection of smallholder agroecosystems, seed saving and exchange, and opposition to transgenics and the patenting regime underpinning development of agricultural biotechnologies. Yet we still need effective policy proposals and direct-action plans to protect native agrobiodiversity and the habitat of wild relatives of heirloom cultivars in the vital centers of origin. While some scholars have documented such projects among LVC affiliates in Cuba, India, and Zimbabwe,<sup>33</sup> LVC itself has not appeared concerned with making this a strategic planning and direct-action priority.

This remains a major issue for Indigenous farmers, plant breeders, and seed savers and could help us reconceptualize food sovereignty to reflect our obligations toward more-than-human beings, including the threatened wild relatives of the thousands of food and medicinal plants stewarded by Indigenous farmers across the planet. In México we have the example of *Zea diploperennis* and the effective campaign to protect native varieties in a center of origin.<sup>34</sup> Indigenous farmers worked with civil society groups, scientists, and environmental and human rights organizations and used the courts to negate investor-state logics and reground México's binding status as a signatory to

the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Cartagena Biosafety Protocols, and the Indigenous consultation statutes of International Labor Organization Convention 169. This led to a ban (widely ignored with impunity by corporate growers to date) on transgenic maize and soybeans as threats to México's sixty-two maize landraces. LVC should clarify and strengthen its work on transgenics and ecosystem justice by more actively supporting grassroots struggles that strategically use select multilateral conventions and national statutes and customary law to promote biosafety and protect the genomic integrity of landrace cultivars, the habitat of wild relatives, and the autonomy of Indigenous seed savers and plant breeders in their centers of cultural and ecological origin. LVC must achieve and promote awareness of the centers of origin and diversification of Indigenous crops *within the United States* and of the struggles of Indigenous farmers seeking to protect their native maize from threats posed by gene flow and the introgression of transgenes.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. FAILURE TO RECOGNIZE THE LIMITS OF THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

The precautionary principle is one of those ethical concepts that reeks of liberal naïveté and the partial politics that arise from acting after damage has been done. For precautionary measures to be effective, one must be in a position to prevent the condition that would cause the actual harm. The Convention on Biological Diversity and the Cartagena Biosafety Protocols were meant to make precautionary regulation practical, but rules are still being promulgated and reformulated long after the environmental release of genetically engineered organisms (GEOs, a.k.a. GMOs) and the widespread commercial and experimental planting of transgenic crops. Despite success in México, precautionary measures are difficult once the gene(ie) is out of the bottle. So we might ask, What's the point? To champion an idea whose time is passed to little discernable effect? If neoliberalism throws precaution to the wind, what is the point of insisting on forms of risk management co-opted by market-steered cost/benefit analysis in the extant regime of environmentality?<sup>36</sup> Remember, harms are cumulative and even epigenetic. So, how are we to engage in effective precau-

tionary regulation when many threats and their effects now involve possible hyperobjects?

A more radical declaration on the environmental, cultural, and social impacts of transgenic technologies would do well by working to (1) eliminate the legal basis of the patents on life regime (which LVC calls for), (2) emphasize a worldwide restoration strategy to eliminate transgenes from plant genomes in centers of origin and diversification, and (3) restore the integrity of landrace heirloom varieties *and* their agroecosystems. Despite the bad news occasioned by the discovery of transgenes in the landrace maizes of Oaxaca in 2001,<sup>37</sup> recent research suggests that transgenic lines are both “promiscuous” and “unstable,” while landraces are “in-bred” and “stable” (genetically speaking). Cultural practices and sound agroecological management should allow seed savers and plant breeders to restore genomic integrity, but this will come with high costs for limited-resource farmers and perhaps some cases of irreversible harm to specific alleles in wild relatives.<sup>38</sup> This approach also requires land redistribution policies to address the political decomposition of Indigenous autonomy in settler colonial capitalist nation-states. The reversal of waves of neoliberal enclosures is a precondition for the resurgence of heritage landscape ecologies in Indigenous territories—we must be able to ban transgenes in the centers of origin. This requires investing in the recovery of the conditions supportive of ecosystem and cultural resilience. Getting beyond neoliberal capitalist rule is one thing; ending the logic of the commodity form and the long duration destructive effects of capitalism as prime driver of the disturbances of the “Capitalocene” is another matter altogether. In this context, the precautionary principle is rendered largely moot, and our strategic focus should encourage a shift toward direct action to dismantle the patenting regime and to promote restoration ecologies as the best-practice horizon for a more radical politics of food systems.

## 5. ACCEPTANCE OF THE FAILED SUSTAINABILITY PARADIGM

Not rendered moot is the question of how communities bounce back and overcome disturbances. The resurgence of alterNative spaces of autonomy foregrounds the protection of ecological and genetic

diversity alongside fulfillment of first obligations to home ecosystems or “full habitance.” This is different from “sustainability.” The latter concept was made fashionable by the UN Commission on Environment and Development (UNCED) and 1992 Earth Summit. There is growing recognition of how “sustainability” has been co-opted by corporate interests and neoliberals promoting “green governmentality.”<sup>39</sup> Also, with a shift to autonomy and resilience theory,<sup>40</sup> a growing number of environmental scientists, ethnoecologists, and political ecologists support Indigenous criticisms of the ethics and politics of “sustainable development.”

Growing numbers of Indigenous activists, including farmers, are rejecting the concept of sustainability as co-opted by neoliberalism. We are by far more concerned with articulating concepts of resilience *that move beyond mere adaptive practices*. For food justice activists, this means espousing more than “food self-sufficiency” (*autosuficiencia alimentaria*).<sup>41</sup> The concept of resilience basically comes down to these principal ideas: First is the idea of the “Capitalocene,” or the “Age of Capital,” as one in which changes in Earth’s systems still operate as a coupling of social and ecological processes just as with prior periods of “anthropogenesis.” The problem now is how the linkage has become inherently antagonistic and destructive on unprecedented temporal and spatial scales. We cannot separate this coupling because conditions in one affect conditions in the other. Second, these systems are resilient only when they are able to adapt to or “bounce back” from disturbances. This ability is a key to the survival of Earth’s life-support systems. The possibility is illustrated by Indigenous peoples who have weathered successive ecological revolutions unleashed by settler colonial nation-states.<sup>42</sup> This is why we need a food sovereignty declaration that embraces anticapitalism and resilience as key principles. Such a declaration would emphasize the “intrinsic value” of this coupling of social and ecological subsystems and assert how justice in “habittance” applies to *all* living organisms and ecosystems, not just human beings. We must overcome the tendency to presume the Earth is only our prostheses.

The United States remains relevant because it is the world’s central food hub and master purveyor of “sustainable” biotechnology and industrial monocultures. But we are also at the center of the urban

ecological revolution being created by food justice struggles in the cities. In the United States and some European countries (most notably Spain, Italy, and France), there is a new wave of “Great Pretenders” behind myriad neoliberal enclosures of agroecological commons. All of these play for larger market share under the brand of sustainability through organic and heritage farm-to-table production schemes. Many organic, local, and slow-food farmers are not the least bit interested in the living and working conditions of women and farm-workers and express little concern for ecosystem values beyond those commoditized as part of the newfangled agricultural tourism markets. Such illusions of sustainability are encouraged by the neoliberal devolution of regulation to the dominant actors across the varied sectors of the agri-food system.

## Food Sovereignty and the State of Economic Exception

I turn to a more detailed discussion of some problems posed by the unacknowledged anthropocentrism of the LVC food sovereignty declaration in light of a failure to challenge sovereign power more explicitly as a state of economic exception. Agamben has made the forceful argument that since 9/11, Western liberal democracies have retreated to a permanent state of exception (or emergency) in which the rule of law is suspended by the sovereign power in the interests of national security. This includes suspension of due process (*habeas corpus*) and equal protection.<sup>43</sup> But the matter is more complicated than that. Agamben states that

modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a *legal civil war* that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system.<sup>44</sup>

Absent integration, this “legal civil war” is leading to the wholesale reduction of entire categories of human beings (tribal peoples, undocumented workers) and more-than-human beings (endangered plants and animals, ecosystems) to “bare life”—a life without political



virtue suspended in a zone of right-lessness, or a being whose life is denied biological flourishing or even survival, since nonsubjects can be killed, or, say, denied water, without such acts constituting murder, extirpation, or extinction. Agamben overlooks this as a condition that Indigenous peoples and ecosystems have experienced for more than five hundred years. Our exception did not begin with the prelude to World War II or after 9/11, and it did not result just in bare life. Instead it produced the Indigenous problem of “bare habitation.” Decolonial scholar Mark Rifkin defines this “as the biopolitical project of defining the proper ‘body’ of the people . . . subtended by the geopolitical project of defining the territoriality of the nation.”<sup>45</sup>

The extension of the state of economic exception to more-than-human beings and entire ecosystems is endemic. While food sovereignty advocates argue for sustainable, equitable, and place-based agri-food systems, LVC underestimates how the violence imposed on organisms and entire ecosystems as exploited objects blocks full realization of Indigenous autonomy. As long as we allow capitalism to miscast ecosystems as the stage for the unfolding of human drama, as long as we fail to enforce respect for the Earth’s life-support systems with their own rules and transformative agency, and as long as we fail to recognize the intrinsic value of ecosystems independent of the economic value capital wishes to inscribe via a universal “social hieroglyphic,” then radical moves beyond the institutions that colonize and commoditize all life, and all organisms, will remain elusive. We need a complete transformation of the “coupling” of social and ecological subsystems rather than reformism tweaking at the edges of selected sectors of the agri-food system. We also need to find other ways to express environmental values without reducing these to human-centered metrology. Under the state of economic exception, capital imposes nonsubject status on Earth’s communities by reducing all to “bare life” or “abstract labor” while forcibly removing or alienating us from place, that is, the condition of bare habitation. This is the first line of defense maintaining the hegemony of the “Republic of Property” (see chapter 11).

Deepening critique along these lines will lead to decolonial modification of the LVC principles of food sovereignty. A chief problem

is the overly eager quest for recognition under the policy- and law-making power of the state (or multilateral institutions) that reinforces the hegemony of sovereign powers to dictate to us what constitutes equitable law and policy. LVC cedes the ground to the Leviathan of capitalist environmental rationalities allowing sovereign powers the space to define what equity and fairness are and to do so in a manner that erases and marginalizes what are called the “rights of nature.” Seyla Benhabib argues that sovereign states are able to more or less exercise “ultimate authority over all subjects *and objects* within a prescribed territory.”<sup>46</sup> For me, this includes the instantiation of nature’s subjugation within the construct of biopolitical sovereignty. LVC declarations on food sovereignty must be reformulated to explicitly reject the biopolitics of bare life/bare habitation and embrace a shift toward alterNative paradigms of interspecies, intergroup, and intergenerational equity, all defining obligations to the Other. This epistemic intersectional challenge can overcome the phenomenologically weak apparatuses and habitus created by settler colonial-capitalist states under neoliberal conductors who still wield control over sovereignty in the current regime of biopower.

Some critics of LVC’s organizational strategy are perhaps justified for questioning a movement that spends a lot of time and energy raising funds to convene international meetings to issue proclamations while the needs of local farmers in struggle are eclipsed by the endless iteration of political demands. Jefferson Boyer is among a group of scholars who are critical of what is perhaps the most ambitious LVC policy initiative yet, a worldwide campaign for agrarian reform as a key to attaining food sovereignty. The goal of returning land to the tiller is laudable, but discursive framing by LVC has been flawed and may have actually damaged smallholder prospects and negotiations for land reform in some countries. In his detailed study of small-farmer movements in Honduras, Boyer notes:

Via Campesina initiated a global campaign for agrarian reform. It stressed that food sovereignty includes the right, and usually the necessity, for peasants, small farmers, farm labourers, indigenous peoples, and women as well as men to shape the institutions and services of such reforms . . . [but] sovereignty is not a term

that expresses the concerns of everyday rural life in the same manner that security does. In Via Campesina's efforts to establish a universalizing alternative to food security, they clearly were seeking to balance several ideological tendencies. . . . The idea of autonomy invoked by the term sovereignty may well appeal to populists and certainly groups influenced by some anarchist traditions . . . but it also can become somewhat *confusing to the many who equate sovereignty with states and not with the rights of particular peoples* or . . . their daily lives.<sup>47</sup>

I share Boyer's concern and find myself growing skeptical of the manner in which we have failed—without much self-criticism or political reflection—to pursue a clearer understanding of why so many concepts in the food sovereignty discourse are objectionable to smallholder farmers and Indigenous people. Boyer surely opens a new line of criticism, but I have four key points of divergence: First is my rejection of the food security frame since, from a decolonial standpoint, we can avoid hunger and still suffer malnourishment from a lack of access to our Indigenous crops, foodways, and heritage cuisines.<sup>48</sup> Second, many Indigenous and other landless and smallholder farmers understandably comprehend the concept of sovereignty in light of deeper histories and lived experiences with the exercise of abusive and violent state powers. This is a realist perception since states in the Global South typically are major accomplices behind bare life/bare habitance. Third, the mostly landless farmers are adept at avoiding confusion about these matters. In Honduras, their clarity of purpose is the reason Indigenous and other smallholder farmers have remained relevant social forces for land redistribution. It is also why they participate in food justice struggles in the “spaces of neoliberal neglect,” to borrow a phrase developed with my colleague Michelle Tellez. Fourth, these smallholder farmers embrace their own visions of autonomy—often understood as place-based coevalness, in a bioregional common, enacted through Indigenous traditions of community-based governance. They certainly do not confuse any of this with “sovereignty” of any kind. In the Latin American context and elsewhere, bioregional commons are the material basis sustaining long-term epistemologies based on relational knowledge. This requires understanding the difference between sovereignty and autonomy when it comes to matters of land redistribution

and tenure while accounting for the differentiated political landscapes of capitalist enclosures in each colonized bioregion.

It is important to recognize how large LVC is. The organization claims more than two hundred million members worldwide. Like other large-scale organizations, LVC may experience the misuse of their “political brand.” A recent example is the case of LVC Mexican affiliate UNORCA (Unión Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas Autónomas) in Chiapas. This entity has a paramilitary wing tied to a cooperative of coffee producers known as ORCAO (Organización Regional de Cafeticultores de Ocosingo). These producers are supporting paramilitary activities by launching violent attacks against Zapatista “Caracoles” (communal villages and schools) in the uplands of Chiapas. This included one incursion resulting in the assassination of beloved Comandante Galiano.<sup>49</sup> When an organization becomes this large, how do leaders coordinate all the groups across the planet? How does one respond to violence unleashed by those seeking justification via association with the brand? This is altering local perceptions of LVC’s relational accountability.

Many colleagues agree with the idea that LVC should offer an alternative organizational form comprised of bioregional nodes across networks linked as global feedback loops and acting as principal drivers of actual resource allocation. The extant transnational organizational form is subject to strong centrifugal forces and escapes the eye of episodic general assemblies, whose members constantly reel from one global gathering to the next, or who find themselves caught up in the endless cycles of local events that command, if only for a moment, global attention. In the meantime, groups with hidden agendas exploit the brand for aims that rely on the exercise of political violence. In México this involves an unholy alliance among narco-trafficking cartels, paramilitary groups, and municipal police acting with impunity against Indigenous communities. This was made clear in the aftermath of the September 2014 Ayotzinapa massacre and the disappearance of forty-three normal school students working on Indigenous agricultural education projects. LVC’s muted response to the larger implications of Ayotzinapa has been deafening.<sup>50</sup> These issues are relevant to current urban agricultural mobilizations, and I address this further in the following, concluding section.

## Food Sovereignty Spans across the Food Chain

We see multiple signs of emerging alternatives to anthropocentrism and the rejection of acquiescence to a neoliberal global order whose biopolitics seek the commodification of everything related to food and foodways. The practical autonomy of place-based Mexican-origin and Mesoamerican diaspora communities relies on the culturally grounded exercise of self-governance, and this allows us to reclaim our seeds, agroecological traditions, foodways, and heritage cuisines. This is occurring in rural and urban areas through the conscious enactment of heterotopias in community gardens, home kitchen gardens, and liberated kitchens spaces, described in the chapters that follow. At the heart of many of these alternatives are organizational forms involving cooperativism inspired by Indigenous general assemblies and a consensus approach to participatory democracy. The prospects for creating true food sovereignty may come to rely on the practices, normative orientations, and relational knowledge of Indigenous farmers and other food-chain workers, including those who have been displaced from originary lands and are both transborder travelers and mobile placemakers.<sup>51</sup>

The strategic problem requires confronting contradictions between rural, peri-urban, and urban areas. The 2001 Principles of Food Sovereignty do not directly address this issue in any meaningful manner. This is a significant oversight since vibrant activism and innovation are occurring in urban and peri-urban agricultural movements across the planet. How do we achieve human rights and culturally appropriate, economically liberating food self-sufficiency on a “planet of slums” unless we address the metabolic disorders and political economic imbalances within and between urban centers and surrounding bioregions?<sup>52</sup> If what we seek is to address the ability for hungry and malnourished people in the cities to provision themselves through sustained access to fresh, organic, and culturally appropriate foods in an equitable life-affirming manner, then we should consider the insights of Philip Aerni, who observes that the restructuring of the global population via rapid urbanization poses serious strategic questions for LVC:

The definition [of food sovereignty] implicitly assumes that local food production and consumption can ensure food security and

therefore the human right to food. It completely ignores . . . [the] process of rapid urbanization. . . . [This] means that a smaller share of the population needs to produce more food with less input [and] is focused on self-sufficiency. . . . [How is this] supposed to feed this rapidly growing urban population? Do[es] the human right to food appl[y] only to those who produce their own food within the self-sufficient community?<sup>53</sup>

This is a profound set of questions. LVC policies and direct actions have so far not advanced self-reflexive analyses or critical policy responses to the dynamics facing communities of resistance in the city-countryside nexus. This seems especially timely given the rapid growth since the 1990s of urban-based food justice movements across México, the United States, and other places.

Displaced farmers, often from the very same rural areas surrounding so-called global cities, and other transborder arrivants are mobilizing these movements. LVC's declaration remains silent on the struggle for the city despite the trend toward a planet of gated cities and sprawling slums pockmarked by food junkyards *and* more hidden kitchen gardens. Urban food justice movements offer a lesson here: LVC could revalorize farmers and their rural communities but also *all* food-chain workers and self-provisioning urban farmers. We all share a desire to escape bare habitance. We are all against being reduced to abstract labor for capitalist production, which is the force behind the precariousness of our condition as unwanted surplus populations forced to find a way to live off the books. The chapters that follow show us how this precarity can also be a source of the capacity to create alterNative convivial or solidarity economies.

LVC must understand why many of the landrace cultivars threatened with extinction are no longer cultivated in their original agro-ecological landscapes. Many rare and endangered heirloom varieties are now cultivated by displaced farmers in cities and suburbs, as illustrated by the Indigenous farmers of the post-NAFTA Mesoamerican diaspora. They are preserving these varieties in urban home kitchen and community gardens and farms across México, the United States, and even Canada. LVC needs to rethink what it would mean to become a global organization and network for *all* food-chain workers, including displaced Indigenous and other "peasant" farmers in

US cities, suburbs, and towns. The autonomy perspectives explored in this chapter are guided by awareness that our movements do not seek permission from the state or corporate acquiescence in order for us to act in solidarity. Relational accountability/solidarity is really praxis not theory; *it is a method of resistance*. We must act everywhere possible in a radical manner by refusing to submit to sovereign power as we rebuild local deep-food systems for ourselves based on relational knowledge of our place-based cultures and convivial economies. Build your own economy—one not separated from the political but converting politics into the art of cohabitation (in Arendt's sense) and dedicated to conviviality and cultural mentoring.

As a university-based research scholar I am obligated to conclude with a brief excerpt from the 2009 UN Environmental Program report *Agriculture at a Crossroads*, which identified a “growing tendency . . . in the United States, to encourage research likely to return financial benefits to the university rather than broader benefits to the public or ecological commons.” The report, also known as the *International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development* (IAASTD), further criticized US universities for “offering private sector partners such as the agrochemical/biotechnology industry a wider role in shaping university research and teaching priorities.”<sup>54</sup> The future of food sovereignty movements clearly will also be shaped and constrained by epistemological politics as these unfold inside US research universities and the land-grant college complex. The future is also already being shaped by the advent of global projects by “philanthrocapitalists” like Bill Gates Jr. But the forces of neoliberal environmentality must face determined and growing opposition from our movement’s “calmecacs”—the Indigenous institutions of higher learning for collective action and the survivance of agroecological knowledge in our return to full habitation.