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REPOSITIONING FOOD SOVEREIGNTY BETWEEN ECUADORIAN NATIONALIST AND COSMOPOLITAN POLITICS

Faced by the contradictions of “modern food” – i.e., the expert-led, market-oriented, industrial designs of agriculture and food policy – we have become increasingly interested in people’s everyday practices as a largely neglected public policy resource (Sherwood et al. 2013). In particular, we are interested in how food counter-movements are materialized and constructed through the interplay, contestation and negotiation of values and interests within specific public debates. Drawing on calls for a paradigm shift in the social sciences from “methodological nationalism” to “methodological cosmopolitanism” (Beck 2006; Beck, Block, Tyfield and Zhang 2013), this chapter explores the experience of Ecuador’s lively food sovereignty movement in confronting seemingly omnipotent power and political interests and ultimately shaping policy reforms.

8 Repositioning food sovereignty

Between Ecuadorian nationalist and cosmopolitan politics

Alberto Arce, Stephen Sherwood and Myriam Paredes

Introduction

Faced by the contradictions of “modern food” – i.e., the expert-led, market-oriented, industrial designs of agriculture and food policy – we have become increasingly interested in people’s everyday practices as a largely neglected public policy resource (Sherwood et al. 2013). In particular, we are interested in how food counter-movements are materialized and constructed through the interplay, contestation and negotiation of values and interests within specific public debates. Drawing on calls for a paradigm shift in the social sciences from “methodological nationalism” to “methodological cosmopolitanism” (Beck 2006; Beck, Block, Tyfield and Zhang 2013), this chapter explores the experience of Ecuador’s lively food sovereignty movement in confronting seemingly omnipotent power and political interests and ultimately shaping policy reforms.

Since its inception as a proposal in 1996, food sovereignty has been diversely described and utilized – from a normative concept and methodological approach to a political proposal and social movement – in response to the neo-liberal economic concept of food security (Rosset 2008). In this chapter, we depart from the perspective that food sovereignty primarily represents an organized response to globalizing forces that are actively undermining rights and territory (see Trauger 2014, as well as the introduction to this volume). Instead, our experiences as researchers and food activists have led us to understand food sovereignty as it was explicitly put forward by Ecuador’s influential informal network of activists from different walks of life and civil society organizations: the *Colectivo Nacional Agroecológico* (known as the *Colectivo*).

During a series of monthly organizational meeting in 2005, the *Colectivo* membership debated concerns over the declining international investment in non-governmental organizations supporting alternative agriculture in the country. In response, they decided to strategically shift the *Colectivo*’s conceptual platform from “agroecology as production” to “agroecology as food” in an effort to engage people’s daily practices as a means of gaining further access to the estimated USD 8 billion that Ecuadorians spent yearly in food and drink

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(Sherwood et al. 2013). In the process, they created new space for “those who eat”, which by design meant growers as well as urban-based families. This led to the arrival of a number of influential leaders and organizations involved in advancing consumer interests, such as the national NGO Utopia and its “Community Food Baskets” purchasing groups, several outspoken chefs and a network of restaurateurs and over time members of the burgeoning *Movimiento de Economía Social y Solidaria del Ecuador (MESSE)*. Nevertheless, it also include like-minded indigenous peoples, mestizos, nationals and foreigners working as practitioners, scientists, and government civil servants. This re-framing of agroecology to food placed the *Colectivo* in the centre of debates in communities throughout the country, leading to direct involvement in the 2007–08 Constitutional Assembly and the drafting of the country’s pioneering food sovereignty mandate and subsequent legislation.¹

In this sense, Ecuador’s food sovereignty movement resembles what Ulrich Beck describes as part of an emergent cosmopolitan reality and cosmopolitical struggle (Beck 2006:9):

The age of cosmopolitization stands for a world that for better or worse we all share, a world that has ‘no outside’, ‘no exit’, ‘no other’ any more. We have to recognize that regardless of how brilliantly and trenchantly we critique the ‘northern narrative’ or ignore the ‘southern narrative’, we are destined to live with these interwoven, contradictory framings and situation in this World at Risk, not only subject to its power of domination but also contaminated by its self-endangerment, corruption, suffering exploitation.

Thus, in our reference to food sovereignty we wish to problematize the notion of globality and modernity from within or without as well as inside or outside. Instead, we emphasize how locally situated actors receive, translate and re-work communicated messages, material resources, technologies, and cultural repertoires and relations as means of re-positioning themselves in relation to “macro” influences and frameworks (Arce, 2010). In this view, civic movements pose and promote alternative agendas for change, which under certain circumstances can come to challenge seemingly dominant and highly intractable forms of authority and order, including from within their own imaginations, families or communities as well as from those born to the externally based expert, industrial baron or State-based bureaucrat. As such, we view the *Colectivo* as not specifically organized around disobedience or “resistance” to the localizing or globalizing economic forces of modern food, but rather it is organized in favour of the on-going, intensifying forces of daily “existence”: finding and strengthening existing patterns of food practice as a means of policy intervention. This is most concretely expressed in its twice yearly national campaign “Que Rico Es!” (i.e., “How Sweet It Is!”), which rather than criticizing industrial food, emphasizes the promotion of existing provocative

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experiences as policy inspiration (Ongeval, 2012).

Conceptual framing

A cosmopolitan perspective on food

From the Greek *cosmo* (world) and *polites* (citizen), cosmopolitanism has been described as no less a part of a fundamental global transformation of modernity that demands re-thinking in the humanities, social sciences and government as well as the very conception of governance and governability (Beck, 2006). Rooted in the age of the Enlightenment, cosmopolitanism began as a normative-philosophical movement organized around a commitment to the primacy of world citizenship over national, religious, cultural, ethnic and other considerations. It also has become an adjective for the elite, ascribed as a personal attitude or attribute in response to a rising since of cultural disparities and parochialism and a call for more refined worldliness. In contrast, here in our sociological application, we share Beck's view of cosmopolitical concerns as a social reflex to the contradictions of modernity and, in our case, the processes of modernization, especially in and around people's primary source of energy and sustenance but also economy, culture and social expression: food.

In our research in Ecuador we find an undeniable, if emergent condition that places into question existing explanations of food tied with modern-day human population, interconnectedness, interaction and intensification as well as with concomitant socio-environmental decline, isolation, alienation and extensification (Sherwood et al., 2013). As such, we understand cosmopolitic as a reflexive response to rising rates of mobility, fluidity and interdependence – for good or for bad – that challenges the largely unquestioned “truth” of a well-organized and functioning (if in need of improved management) natural correspondence among national territory, legal institutions, society and culture. As Beck and Sznaider (2006) argue, there is an undeniable cosmopolitical turn in the social sciences organized around three intellectual concerns: 1) a blinding methodological nationalism as a dominant perceptual categorization in the social sciences, 2) the rise of a cosmopolitan condition in the 21st century, and 3) the driving need of an alternative methodological cosmopolitanism.

Where globalization occurs “out there” in the external world, cosmopolitic is simultaneously endogenous-exogenous – it is seamlessly generated from “within” and “without”. For example, through their production and consumption of food from within the nation-state, people bring forth certain cosmopolitical realities that defy simple dualistic or dichotomous categorizations, such as local or global and lay or expert. Through endlessly individual–collective as well as interactive– creative processes, people give birth to certain highly mobile realities capable of crossing and transversing substantial cultural, social, and physical obstacles (consider, for instance, effects tied to modern food, such as the decline of soils, hydric systems and biological resources as well as pesticide poisonings, obesity, and global warming). The task of a cosmopolitan social science, we believe, is to shed light on how cosmopolitical realities emerge and take social hold (or not) and how they can grow and diversify both within and

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across territories as well as in the imagination.

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Liberating food sovereignty: from State to state

Over a century of methodological nationalism, the social sciences have colonized a particular empirical perspective of the world (Beck and Sznaider, 2006). The descriptors of reality, from statistics to research procedures, are almost always national. Entire academic disciplines and movements, are organized around describing, analysing, explaining and perpetuating the nation-state and its multi-state alternatives as the single most coherent ways of explaining human experience, social organization, policy, and politics. A fundamentally blinding categorization in the social sciences is in need of empirical, theoretical and organizational unpacking and reform: “methodological nationalism” – the notion that the nation-state exists as a coherent entity that subsumes social organization, society, and humanity. In their methodological preoccupation with the state as its primary unit of analysis, food activists and social scientists effectively build their own conceptual confines. In so doing, they risk making food sovereignty “a prisoner of the state” (Beck and Sznaider 2006: 6).

In its emphasis in people’s daily practices, cosmopolitan food movements connect, intentionally or not, with broader regimes of practice that seamlessly cross boundaries, the outcome of which may (or may not) take place from within the geographic territory of a state. In the process, actors can give rise to potentially more transcendent social transnationalities – effectively a re-territorialization. A cosmopolitan reality analysis examines the nature and development of transnational networks of people, places and materialities that affect situated social actions and political experiences. In this chapter, we draw on experiences of Ecuador’s lively counter-movements around food to make a case for why and how food sovereignty needs to be understood as a cosmopolitan reality.

Recently, Ecuador has experienced a concerted grassroots effort to delineate the endlessly connected and complex realities of agro-food. Primarily led by a network of civic and social movements diversely interested in building democratic institutions, the country’s food movements arguably have sparked new interests, debates and reflexive understandings of food-related issues. To begin to study this public involvement in food sovereignty as a social movement and subsequent institutional responses, we first must methodologically ground ways of describing and analysing how food movement actors seek local, transnational and nomadic organizational elements in the alliances they create.

In order to analyse these dimensions we must critically assess nationalism as an ontological “real and empirical world”. This critical conceptualization sits alongside globalization’s broad description of society as homogeneous, and permits us to embrace food sovereignty as a cosmopolitan reality. This points to the way in which entities, regardless of origin or intention, are used and recombined in social practice, generating assemblages from the dynamic properties of “new materialities” and revealing how these properties shape modern courses of action. In effect, the blending together and relocation of categorizations emerge from actors’ ability to knit cosmopolitan food-commons

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from the interplay of global and local, international and national, private and

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public hegemonic and non-hegemonic discourses and values emanating from social life, as composed of multiple emerging and partial realities. An expression of this is the right of people to access and control their genetic and biological resources – “seeds” – to sustainably manage their food crops.

In continuation, we summarize the birth and consolidation of food sovereignty in Ecuador as public policy. In particular, we describe and analyse the arrival of food sovereignty in the *Colectivo*, its insertion in the 2007–8 National Constitutional Assembly and subsequent *lex terrae*. We focus on the on-going controversies over legislative proposals in agriculture and food to explore how different social actors have utilized food sovereignty for competing purposes, and how emergent discourses and narratives have contributed to new relationships and affects, both in the territory of Ecuador and beyond. Drawing on these seemingly disparate, yet interconnected experiences, we aim to conceptually unpack the contradictions between nationalism and food sovereignty in concept and in practice.

Food sovereignty: from civic proposal to constitutional mandate

Following five decades of agricultural modernization, by the early 1990s Ecuador’s food systems were in socio-environmental decline (Sherwood and Paredes, 2013). Public policy that championed land reform and industrial-era technologies commonly brought immediate solutions to rural people. Nevertheless, over time modernization also generated second-order problems, arguably worse than the original problems it was intended to address. For example, mechanized total tillage on hillsides led to large-scale soil erosion, “improved” crop varieties displaced existing genetic resources and promoted declines in agro-biodiversity, pesticides generated new pernicious pest problems as well as a number of serious public health problems, and the growth and centralization of financial systems and markets undermined terms of trade and fairness for growers as well as urban-based consumers.

As a consequence, beginning in the 1990s, millions of rural people abandoned agriculture and migrated to urban centres or to other countries in search of a better livelihood. While previously the concern in Ecuador was poverty and hunger, recently a shift to processed foods and foodstuffs as well as a shift towards sedentary lifestyles has led to an increase in the rates of overweight/ obese youth and women, which now outnumbers undernourishment (Yepez et al. 2008, Freire et al. 2013). Nevertheless, these developments did not occur in a vacuum. Growing awareness of the harmful and unwanted consequences of agricultural modernization have fuelled growing social protest and counter-activity (Sherwood and Paredes, 2014). Paredes (2010) shows how families continually accommodate and adapt technologies, generating nuances and unique patterns of production linked to expressions of agency and democracy. In addition, Sherwood et al. (2013) find that growing public awareness of the contradictions of modernization have spirited lively civic

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movements. Born in

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the 1970s as a result of growing concerns over the negative consequences of pesticides, a growing agroecology movement has become well established in Ecuador, joining similar movements elsewhere in Latin America and beyond (Altieri and Toledo, 2011).

In 2005, different actors involved in agroecology as well as in consumer groups came together to form the *Colectivo Nacional Agroecológico* for the purpose of mutual support and broader political influence in the country. Faced with declining enthusiasm over its earlier preoccupation with agronomy and production, the *Colectivo* decided to adopt “food sovereignty” as a new, strategic platform that would permit both rural growers and urban-based consumers to come together over a common interest: “healthy food”. While different cultural, social and environmental purposes inspired individual actors in the *Colectivo*, they shared a concern over the perceived avarice of a global industrial agrifood complex made up of multinational grain traders, giant seed, chemical and fertilizer corporations, processors, global multiple retailer food chains and supermarkets and the perceived harmful health, cultural, social and environmental consequences of their activity (Colectivo Agrario, 2009).

Following a decade of financial and political crises, growing rates of poverty and emigration of 25 per cent of its population, in 2006 Ecuador elected an outspoken professor at the *Universidad San Francisco de Quito* and former Economic Minister, Dr Rafael Correa, on a radical nationalist platform to rewrite the constitution as a means of establishing greater citizen participation and control over government. In 2007, President Correa dissolved the government and set up a Constitutional Assembly. Diverse actors in the *Colectivo* played a direct role with political leaders, in particular the President of the National Constitutional Assembly and the President of the *Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas, Indígenas y Negras* (FENOCIN), in debating and lobbying for a policy shift from food security to food sovereignty. The resulting 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution proposes “food sovereignty” as a national mandate for advancing the multi-dimensional context of agricultural production, emphasizing the “social purpose” of land as a means of equitable, democratic social development and natural resource conservation in favour of biodiversity (articles 276, 282, 334 and 400), equitable food distribution and pro-poor trade (article 335) as well as ample access to culturally appropriate food and a healthy diet, in particular through the utilization of native crops, animals, and other locally available food sources (articles 13 and 281).

The vibrant assembling of food

At the heart of the food sovereignty movement lies the recognition that food production and consumption (i.e. food co-production) is associated with social contexts built in and around institutions of the market, household, and the state. The interaction of these social and physical spheres creatively maintain and undermine meanings of “security”. For example, experiences in the family are

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materially and socially (re)constructed by modifying the connections between

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individual lives, their commons (stocks of foods as a global public goods) and the nationalization and internationalization of food practices. To shed light on the multiple, sometimes contradictory, processes in Ecuador we situate our analysis in three concurrent contexts: 1) the effects of the global agro-export production of vegetables in changing the Andean diet in the central highland province of Cotopaxi; 2) the *Colectivo's* promotion of food sovereignty through COPISA; and 3) President Correa's proposal for the introduction of genetically modified organisms as a food sovereignty development strategy. We look qualitatively at the spaces of encounter, the intensity of interaction, the production of new materialities and issues of democratic governance around food sovereignty.

The place of food in changing Andean regimes of living

Beside the institutionalization of the food sovereignty movement, and the redefinition of the national food platform, the conceptual parameters of food sovereignty are made clear by people's on-going struggles to deal with a new lifestyles and the effect of agro-export ventures to achieve degrees of food security and protection against frequent shocks of the national and global economy that radicalizes social inequality. To illustrate this phenomena characterized by the specific situation of food vulnerability, we briefly present a profile of on-going research in the central highland province of Cotopaxi.

Cotopaxi presents an extraordinary incidence of poverty (80 per cent) and child malnutrition (60 per cent). It seems this is a direct consequence of the highly concentrated land tenure, ownership and the unequal distribution of resources that has remained unaltered since the last century, in spite of successive agrarian reforms. Subsistence agriculture in highly vulnerable land – on the moors and hillsides – is the constant source of peasant labour for commercial agriculture that has taken place down in the valley among the best arable and irrigated land. This situation favours the establishment of large agricultural farms that are owned or in association with agro-export companies (Bretón 2012, Yumbra 2013). The subdivision of peasant land, due to population growth and inheritance partitions, has affected the ability of families to feed and live off agriculture (Martínez 2006). However, indigenous people have developed life strategies, based on labouring outside their subsistence plots and men have embraced migration as a livelihood strategy. Migration is one of the reasons why the population of the province has grown much more slowly than in the rest of the country.

In the 1990s, Ecuadorian governments, influenced by global free market policies, strongly promoted exports of non-traditional products, such as broccoli. At the same time, demand for fresh vegetables out of season in the United States, Europe and Asia increased. In Cotopaxi, landowners and agribusiness responded by producing broccoli for distant markets. Broccoli exports grew by 253 per cent between 2000 and 2007, while from 2008 the volume of exports began a sharp decline, in part associated with US agriculture trade sanctions as

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well as its financial crisis. This culminated in a 69 per cent drop in the volume

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of Ecuador's broccoli production between 2007 and 2013.² The most plausible explanation for this decline in agro-export is the Government's policy reforms during the period, involving tight controls over short-term labour contracts, and an increase in daily wages and mandatory health care and retirement provisions, which essentially doubled labour costs over night. In Cotopaxi owners of agribusiness and agro-industries responded to this situation with the dismissal of nearly 50 per cent of workers and the intensification of the production requirements of the remaining workforce (Yumbla 2013).

The crisis of the agro-export business shocked the provincial agricultural labour market. Agro-export ventures have been an important regional source of employment for peasant families and small producers. Nevertheless, development indicators have continued showing high rates of poverty and chronic malnutrition (about 25 per cent) that are among the highest in the country (Carrillo et al., 2012). This situation suggests that even at the height of the global export of broccoli living conditions did not substantially improve for the sector's labour force (Freire et al. 2013:33). Social inequality associated with food remained a central feature among the historically disadvantaged indigenous populations in Cotopaxi.

While agro-export activities may not have had an important impact on levels of poverty and chronic malnutrition, the effect of agro-export activities is significant at community level, transforming the rural area through employment opportunities, the expansion of wage labour and also, indirectly, urban migration. Three important issues have a bearing on our understanding of this change. First, the country's new labour code has promoted the legal formalization of contracts, leading to more permanent employment as well as health insurance and retirement benefits. In practice, however the new labour policies appear to have generated appalling labour conditions for the part-time, informal labour sector. Secondly, agro-export activities created a regional labour market for young people and women, who are considered special labour for certain essential production activities, such as seedling management, pruning, and harvesting (Yumbla 2013). And thirdly, it led to an increase in the purchasing power of the regional youth labour force. This is expressed in new forms of consumption, in particular the sale of electrodomestic machines, cell phone contracts, clothing and motorized vehicles.

While women have gained greater access to salary-earning opportunities, this has not normally diminished their household production and labour requirements. In the case of home care for the family, they have increased their total hours of daily work (Soto 2014). Women generally are responsible for getting resources for food at home, grazing animals, producing food in family plots, preparing food and finding employment as wage labourers (Yumbla, 2013). The group of women working the greatest amounts of overtime hours in the agribusiness sector are under 25 years and have young children. Regarding diet, today rural families are eating a greater amount of fruits and vegetables than in the 1980s (Soto 2014, Weismantel 1994), however access to work in the

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agribusiness sector has increased consumption of carbohydrates and processed

sugars and decreased consumption of animal protein. For those closest to an urban population centre, a clear dietary transition to industrialized/processed foods is evident (Soto 2014, Oyarzun et al. 2013).

Alongside diet transition due to increasing consumption of industrialized/processed food, two highly nutritious Andean food crops – lupine and quinoa – have gained global market value outside the Andean region, contributing to the reconstitution of local diets because only families that produce these grains themselves continue to consume them in significant proportions. The tendency to consume quinoa and lupine when producers own control over their seeds, also has its variations. Research has shown that 30 per cent of rural households headed by women (due in large part to their partner's emigration), work as wage labourers. These women usually plant local varieties of lupine and quinoa, but they devote essentially the entire harvest to sale for cash income. This is because these households generally are situated on small, arid plots of land, where only local varieties of these unusually robust crops can survive the harsh environmental conditions while also demanding relatively low labour requirements while in the field. Meanwhile, the processing of quinoa and lupine demand resources, not only water and wood for domestic treating but also time for cooking. For these women time is a factor that is limited, given their domestic responsibilities and need to tend family plots, alongside working as labourers. In these circumstances the reduced time needed for industrialized food preparation becomes attractive. As a result of these factors, women heads of households typically sell their highly nutritious Andean crops in order to have more cash resources available for purchasing industrialized/processed food, which tends to be less expensive by weight, but also less nutritious.

In summary, in Cotopaxi globalization has influenced a range of phenomena linked to shifts in the agribusiness demand for wage labour and changes in the Andean diet. Brief reference to our on-going empirical research as well as that in nearby provinces Tungurahua, Bolivar and Chimborazo (Oyarzun et al. 2013) underlines how the Andean regime of living is changing in ways that the food sovereignty movement seeks to address, in particular through the very robust and nutritious native crops that are being discarded for less nutritious, imported foodstuffs. Changes in diet involving a rupture within the existing Andean “reality” and the establishment of a process of partial (re)connections in the different styles of consuming or marketing quinoa and lupine has created a parallel and comparable cosmopolitan dynamic from below to the global ventures led by the agrobusiness sector. In places such as Cotopaxi, the cosmopolitization of food sovereignty has the potential to generate a repositioning of actors' relationship to Andean crops and industrialized food in their respective lifeworlds and social networks.

Bringing-forth food sovereignty through COPISA³

Here, we follow the origin, debates and decisions of the *Colectivo Nacional*

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Agroecologico to collaborate with the nation-state in establishing and advancing an

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explicit public policy transition to food sovereignty. Following public ratification of the 2008 National Constitution, the *Colectivo* became directly involved in the creation of the Food Sovereignty Law, known as LORSA, and its implementation. Following the approval of LORSA in 2010, the *Colectivo* membership shifted its attention to the National Assembly's agency charged with putting food sovereignty into practice and motion: the *Conferencia Plurinacional e Intercultural de Soberanía Alimentaria* (COPISA).

COPISA is constituted of eight different technical committees, with each committee headed by a relevant national representative from civil society, selected by his or her peers and provided with a government salary and logistical support for a period of two years, with the possibility of serving two terms.⁴ These representatives are not government officials, and thus each technical committee has the freedom to stand for the diverse interests in their sector. Civic associations, social movements, projects and non-governmental organizations contribute to debates as voluntary participants. The main activity during COPISA's first two years was to promote public education and debate, usually done through provincial forums, and reach consensus on policy recommendation to inform the National Assembly's subsequent legislative activities in food sovereignty.

Through leadership in two of COPISA's technical committees: 1) Agrobiodiversity, Seeds and Agroecología and 2) Consumption, Nutrition and Food Health, the *Colectivo* organized public consultations in every province of the country over two and a half years involving thousands of participants, leading to a series of legislative proposals and counteractions by competing interests, including officials in private industry, National Assembly representatives, Ministers, and President Correa himself. By the end of 2011, COPISA had finalized the public consultation for Agrobiodiversity, Seeds and Agroecología as well as Water, Land and Territories and formally submitted each bill to the National Assembly in March of 2012. To mobilize public opinion, in 2012 COPISA supported a series of national and international conferences on individual issues as well as the overall policy significance of its proposals, where important actors were invited to directly comment in the National Assembly. By the end of 2012, the *Colectivo's* representatives in COPISA shifted their full energies to the Technical Committee for Consumption, Nutrition and Health.

Roberto Gortaire, a pioneer and leader of the national "Consumer Food Baskets" and the *Colectivo's* consumer representative to COPISA, was the President of the Technical Committee for Consumption, Nutrition and Health. During an interview with our research team, he emphasized the unique importance of the "Consumption Committee":

From the beginning [of COPISA], ...it was accepted that consumption was one of the key components [of food sovereignty]. In the Agrobiodiversity Committee the focus has always been on supporting farmers' organizations

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and to make the production side aware of the environmental dangers of

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“modern” agriculture. Now, it is time for the consumer to consolidate the initial changes we have achieved and complete the agro-food agenda. The “Consumption Committee” is the brainchild of the *Colectivo Nacional Agroecológico*, especially of its “*Come Sano, Seguro y Soberano*” campaign as well as the experiences of the consumer network *Mar, Tierra y Canasta* [Sea, Land and Food Baskets].

The Consumer Committee operates differently than the other COPISA Technical Committees. For example, “Water, Land, Territory and Communities” and “Agrobiodiversity, Seeds and Agroecology” were focused on drafting legislative proposals. In contrast, the Consumption Committee has concentrated its energies on increasing public awareness of food sovereignty and strengthening the voice of civic food networks. By December 2011, the Consumer Committee had held four internal organization meetings, leading to consensus on its priorities: 1) to mobilize a mass communication campaign, 2) to foment national debates, 3) to build a social-civic platform in favour of “sustainable consumption”, and 4) to provide a space where a variety of social movements and civil society actors could exchange knowledge and information on health and nutrition.

Different actors in the Consumption Committee have their own ideas of what COPISA is and what it should do to advance food sovereignty. As Chair, Roberto explains that in COPISA there are people from the agroecology movement, others come from the sphere of health and nutrition, and others represent particular conservation interests. Participants tend to have a long history in community activism. Most are Ecuadorian in nationality, with many having lived abroad as students and migrants where they became active in different social and environmental causes, such as those championed by the NGOs Oxfam, Greenpeace, and Slow Food as well as local community coops and even the international “Occupy” movement. A sizable number of volunteers in the Consumption Committee originate from other parts of South America as well as countries in North America and Europe. Overall, participants get involved based on their own vested interest in a particular aspect of food sovereignty. Roberto explains that his commitment rests in the Catholic Church’s long-standing efforts to mobilize the space of family-level consumption as means of raising critical awareness and promoting social transformation, especially between urban-based poor and marginalized rural communities.

Claudia is part of a group that call itself “*Hermanas Luneras*” (literally, “*Sisters of the Moon*”) that meets to discuss women’s concerns and to awake female consciousness and activism. Claudia recently returned from a five-year study at the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Italy, created by Carlo Petrini, the founder of Slow Food. Claudia explains, “In the thinking of Slow Food, the consumer is not just a person who eats or takes on a product. He or she is also a person who actively participates as a co-producer [of society].”

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Claudia revealed her personal reasons for taking part in COPISA:

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I learned interesting things in Italy, but always with the idea of coming back [to Ecuador]. Now I'm here with the idea of contributing to co-create a good and healthy life through food, but now in the Ecuadorian context. A lot of things are going on at the political level; COPISA is an interesting space with different social and civic organizations, determined to address food concerns. We have a lot of problems in Ecuador with obesity, nutrition and the exclusion of small producers.

Eliana is a lower middle class, urban-based single mother and communications specialist who runs an education programme on food for Ecuador's National Public Radio. She explains that she engages with COPISA for a number of reasons. *Ferias agroecológicas* have provided her with valuable contacts, partners in their activities to make people aware of the need to generate local change and sustainable development. Eventually, the access to other agroecological markets in the province of Imbabura and Carchi allowed them to participate in events in the province of Chimborazo and Cotopaxi. She explained that their general strategy was to work around a food theme and invite participants of the food fair to discuss a certain innovation or issue of interest around food production or consumption. The idea was to find new linkages between consumers and producers, and to get to know what people think about agroecological products. Eliana continues:

The theme of food sovereignty is something that has already inspired us – it is inside of each of us. Food sovereignty is the evocation of all those tastes you have experienced before; today, however, you feel you are ready to reflect on them with your own practice – the here and now. This knowledge is a recollection of a collective experience of food and life; this is also what the “minga” [the Andean tradition of collectivized work] is all about. To support food sovereignty you need someone to generate mobilization, create new spaces, to organize and to populate them with the recollection of the vital force of food. We also want to bring together experiences from abroad – from Canada, Europe, what is happening with the Kyoto Protocol, etcetera – to inform and inspire new actions.

The Consumer Committee Chair, Roberto, summarized his understanding of COPISA:

Of course, this is a voluntary space. This is a kind of experiment in participatory democracy, although within the terms defined by the government. You have to understand, it is a process of social participation, where we are exercising a sort of authority that the government allowed us to have. Obviously, people do this voluntarily. We are taking advantage of this constitutional window they opened up for us. How this opportunity on food concerns will evolve, depends on the voluntary mystique and synergies

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emerging from the Committee.

Roberto believes that COPISA is not an organism that will replace social movements, but help them to advance their objectives at this particular moment. Through involvement in COPISA, social and civic organizations can shape politics, especially through influencing the debates as well as the content of legislative recommendations.

The Consumption Committee in COPISA has become a publically supported platform for debates on consumer food issues. In the process, the network has generated new political themes and symbols around food sovereignty. This is a para-state space where the reflective role of the consumer, as a political actor, is promoted and repositioned in society, in direct competition with the global agrofood complex and against the neoliberal notion of free market capitalism. The Committee embodies a multiplicity of narratives and it carries different meanings and symbols that are negotiated by actors in their everyday practices and political conversations on the power of food. In short, COPISA is an umbrella, carrying along actors with different opinions, agendas and interests. There are many agents of change involved who are contesting the concepts, symbols and the language of food practices.

Re-defining the nationalist platform: controversy over Genetically Modified Organisms

During his 1 September 2012 weekly address, President Correa made the surprising announcement that he intended to change the constitution in favour of introducing transgenic seeds and crops. He began his national television presentation by stating, “The worst thing that we can do [as a country] is to be fooled into seeing the truth. Here there are people who, for privileging their fundamentalist ideas, they have fear of information and they even have fear of the truth.” This was followed by a slide with the title, “What is a transgenic?” Reading it, he explained, “A *transgenic* is a living organism that possesses genetic material from another living organism and that has been introduced in an artificial manner in its genetic material with the end of obtaining new biological characteristics, such as resistance, susceptibility, production of proteins or pharmaceutical qualities, and immunological reactions.”

The President went on to summarize that Article 401 of the 2008 Constitution stated, “It is declared that the country be free of transgenic seeds and crops.” He explained how this provision came to be:

I remember when we discussed this in 2008. I was surrounded by the ‘blanket’ of Alberto Acosta (President of the National Constitutional Assembly) and he pulled out an article produced by himself. He said to me, this is over transgenics... I remember thinking to myself, my God, what a crazy idea [to place this in a constitution], but no one had anything to say. I thought to myself, what a fundamentalist idea: no to transgenics. I regret not having said [at the time], ‘Categorically no, this idea is a mistake!’

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Referring back to the slide of Article 401, the President continued, “At the very least, I achieved this: With the exception and only in the case of properly established national interests by the President of the Republic and the National Assembly can genetically modified seeds and crops be introduced. The State will regulate according to strict norms of biosecurity the use and development of biotechnology.”

He explained that the precautionary principle is based on the opposite of the “normal”. Then, he conflated might with right and his national mandate to support technology. Cautioning on the fundamentalist idea of opposing biological modernity and appealing to an audience supporting progress, he explained that biotechnology is potentially good for the country. For President Correa, the responsibility of citizens is not to be deceived by accepting inappropriate ideological conclusions, namely the abandonment of modern science and technology.

The President went on to equate biological modernization with the specific process of the de-regulation of global trade in agricultural commodities. Then, he explained that it is contradictory to exclude transgenic seeds and crops, but meanwhile, the country imports products made with transgenic seeds and crops:

All the cereals that you eat at breakfast, especially those of children, are transgenics. Soya is transgenic, imported from Argentina. Tomato paste is transgenics. So what we are [ultimately] doing is favoring the promotion of more imports. One of the great mistakes that we are making is confusing the scientific part over transgenics with the political economy part of [criticizing] transnational companies. They are distinct problems. But what we are ending up doing is favoring the transnational companies, because we are importing what we could produce nationally.

The President then introduced Dr Cesar Paz-y-Miño, a geneticist from the *Universidad de las Americas* in Quito, while declaring that the future of Ecuador’s food security depended on biotechnology. Paz-y-Miño walked the audience through the benefits of genetic engineering, and answering the potential public concerns over their safety. His underlying argument centred on the national primary of biological modernization, resting upon a conjecture of unregulated global markets and a consumerism associated with modern forms of life. His conclusion was that policy makers needed to offer a positive response to the idea that more technological and genetic fixes were the best pathway to a better future. Paz-Miño’s subordination of the interests of the broad and diverse social base of the sovereignty movement to the technocratic agenda of the experts represented an effort to reposition Science and the State’s central role in determining the national geo-political aims of the country.

Despite the constitutional level prohibition of GMOs, President Correa closed the session by informing the public that Ecuador would inevitably shift its food policy to the proliferation of GMOs. President Correa concluded, “This

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[technology] will enable us to overcome such extreme conditions in the

lives of our people. No one wants to take risks, but as academics, scientists, and intelligent people, we cannot afford to *a priori* reject opportunities.”

The President’s public proclamation for biotechnology provoked strong reactions from the general public but especially food activists, and President Correa proceeded with a series of public “debates” on GMO technology, linked to an aggressive government information campaign in the media, which is carrying on at the time of this writing. While much of the controversy over GMOs centres on their human health impacts, the social consequences on rural families, communities and the broader public are presented as less controversial than the new possibilities promised by the government’s aggressive modernization project. The Ecuadorian experience with the tenacity of biotechnology industry shows that support for the intensification of industrial agriculture and food does not render the social world more transparent. Instead, it redefines nationalism as a highly ambitious project, to date determined by the successful entrepreneurship of elite technocratic interests rather than globalizing sensibilities over territory and rights.

Conclusion

Food sovereignty is commonly understood as a counter-discourse that brings forward a political challenge to technocratic models of food security, the shortcomings of modernization, and the negative dimensions of the corporate agro-food industry. This is an important perspective. Nevertheless, such macro characterizations narrow the focus to privilege analytically the politico-economic and institutional architecture of contemporary food actualities, with particular focus on the nation state, rather than starting from the problematic of producing and consuming food under the impact of globalization processes. These processes do not allow us to assume implicitly an identification between regions, provinces, society and nation. In other words, here, the ability of a state’s boundaries to enclose, encapsulate or control the communication, networking and imagination of people falls into doubt. In practice, a citizen’s activity and its consequences may seamlessly link with social activity elsewhere in ways that transcend boundaries and defy any reasonable notion of a coherent nation-state. In fact, through their endless processes of alliance building, maintaining and transforming networks of social relations and identities, people can give birth to new bodies of thought, object and organization, which over time effectively can take on lives of their own, ultimately leading to the re-form and population of existing geographic, legal and administrative norms and practices.. Food exercises power as material to be worked, performed and portrayed within and beyond peasant family agriculture and livelihoods. As we have demonstrated in the case of Ecuador, food materialities are composed of a complex series of intertwined practices that are forged through the cosmopolitical force of the encounter, struggle and negotiation through different transnational networks of people and their nomadic alliances, practices and experience. Therefore, in our view, it is erroneous to assume that food sovereignty is to be located within the borders of

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the nation-state and concomitant social inequalities.

Each of the dimensions explored above raises critical issues, supporting the point that food sovereignty should be understood as a potential cosmopolitical force and reality. This challenges nationalism as an ontological world of geopolitical interests. Ecuador is an important case because it throws into question whether or not food sovereignty can afford autonomy within a national regime to enable people to produce and consume food in a sustainable way in the context of social inequality.

The case of COPISA demonstrates a new institutional-democratic space, where several civic and social movements promote food sovereignty; these ideas are part of a potential cosmopolitan food reality, where distant places and experiences are linked to the intensity of the social force of food in multiple sites. Nevertheless, so far COPISA has failed to offer a cosmopolitan perspective to challenge the national and global battleground of political interests on how to solve existing technical bottlenecks that generate worldwide inequalities with social and environmental implications. This is a serious problem, because in spite of food sovereignty's legal and constitutional recognition in Ecuador, the sovereignty food movement lacks political clout to achieve an institutional shift from nationalism to cosmopolitan policies. Perhaps this is the reason why President Correa's redefinition of the radical nationalist platform came as a total surprise to COPISA. This means that the biological modernization of food production and the acceptance of biotechnology are beyond the categories of the food sovereignty movement and the political imagination of COPISA.

The challenges COPISA faces not only within national politics but also in trying to generate a new food regime when confronted with the reality of people's changing lifestyles are brought to the fore in the case of Cotopaxi, where the segmentation of the labour market and the creation of diverse styles of production and consumption of Andean grains are linked to involvement in wage labour; other livelihood activities, such as food preparation, are threatened or marginalized by women's lack of time and by the accessibility of cheap industrial food. It is important that the food sovereignty movement addresses these specific experiences as cosmopolitical realities, rather than particular national cases, and takes into account how actors' process their experiences, create practical action, and incorporate uncertainty into their regime of living.

In our view the conceptual challenge at hand for food studies is to develop a cosmopolitical agenda capable of revealing the contradictions between food sovereignty as a nationalist or multi-nationalist movement based on abstract dualities and dichotomies, and food sovereignty as a fundamentally integrative and synergistic transnational experience resulting from the contingent side effects of global capitalism and its consequences. Tied to the changing nature of nationalism, a cosmopolitical perspective raises the need for a reconceptualization of food sovereignty in a context where peasant livelihoods are embedded in the intensification of the daily realities of the consumer-citizen, be they in the city, the countryside or the household. This is a promising dynamic, capable of reconstituting economies, cultures and society but also in engaging with the present neglect of the

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new materialities and subjectivities of “food cosmopolitanism”.

This includes changes in diet, under-nutrition, obesity and food inequalities that transcend the boundaries of present-day social sciences and food activism.

Notes

- 1 The 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution diversely defines “food sovereignty” in the multi-dimensional context of agricultural production, emphasizing the “social purpose” of land as a means of equitable, democratic social development and natural resource conservation and in favour of biodiversity (articles 276, 282, 334 and 400), equitable food distribution and commercialization (article 335), and ample access to culturally appropriate food and a healthy diet, in particular by means of native crops, animals, and other food sources (articles 13 and 281). (Available at: <http://www.mmrree.gob.ec/ministerio/constituciones/2008.pdf>). As per Sherwood et al. (2013), in practice, the implementation of these constitutional provisions is richly diverse and sometimes contradictory.
- 2 Sistema de Información Nacional de Agricultura, Ganadera, Acuicultura y Pesca (SINAGAP/MAGAP): <http://sinagap.agricultura.gob.ec/index.php/productos-agropecuarios> (accessed on 21 January 2014).
- 3 We want to thank Kaat van Ongeval for the information in relation to COPISA. This section is based on the information she collected for her MSc Thesis in 2011–2012. Sole responsibility for the editing and interpretation remains with the authors.
- 4 The eight COPISA technical committees are: 1) Water, Land, Territory and Communities, 2) Consumption, Nutrition and Health, 3) Agrobiodiversity, Seeds and Agroecology, 4) Fishery and Marine Ecosystems, 5) Capital and Productive Infrastructure, 6) Processing and Transformation of Food, 7) Food Standards, and 8) Public Procurement and Trade.

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