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## **The contested terrain of food sovereignty construction: toward a historical, relational and interactive approach**

Christina M. Schiavoni

This contribution puts forward a historical, relational and interactive (HRI) approach to food sovereignty research. A historical lens allows us to understand the social structures and institutions that condition the politics of food over time and the ways in which the agency of relevant state and societal actors has been, and continues to be, enhanced and exercised, or not, in the political contestation over the food system. A relational lens allows us to capture the process-oriented nature of food sovereignty – the ways in which the very meanings and attempted practices of food sovereignty are being dynamically and contentiously shaped and reshaped over time. An interactive lens allows us to analyze how actors within the state and in society are dialectically linked, molding the construction of food sovereignty through their interactions. Rather than an enquiry into food sovereignty per se, this piece is about efforts toward food sovereignty, partly to address a tendency in the literature and political debates to conflate the two. This is thus an investigation into food sovereignty construction, meaning how food sovereignty is being articulated and attempted, as well as contested – including resisted, refracted or reversed – in a given setting. The case of Venezuela is examined as one of a growing number of countries where food sovereignty has been adopted into state policy and among the longest-running experiments in its attempted construction. Concluding reflections are shared on the extent to which the HRI framework can help us understand the current conjunctural crisis facing Venezuela's food system, and implications for food sovereignty research and activism more broadly.

**Keywords:** food sovereignty; food politics; Venezuela; state-society relations; historicization

Research into food sovereignty – broadly defined by transnational social movements as ‘the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems’ (Nyéléni 2007a) – is a dynamically evolving area of academic inquiry. Recent years have seen a burgeoning of studies focused on theoretical explorations of the concept, on the dynamics within and among movements connected to it, and on real-life attempts to put it into practice. From within these studies is an emerging consensus that food sovereignty, in its multiple dimensions, is best understood and approached as a process (Edelman et al. 2014; Iles and Montenegro de Wit 2015; Shattuck, Schiavoni, and VanGelder 2015). The concept itself is a moving target, a reflection, in part, of the shifting terrain of global agrifood politics (McMichael 2015) and of the new actors who have taken it up (Patel 2009). The peasant movements that originally thrust the concept into public light continue to form a key mobilizing base for food sovereignty, while they

have been joined by an increasingly diverse set of actors in both the South and North. This is extending food sovereignty's reach into new geographical and political spaces, yielding fresh context-specific understandings of and efforts toward food sovereignty in the process (Shattuck, Schiavoni, and VanGelder 2015; Brent, Schiavoni, and Fradejas 2015; Figueroa 2015; Desmarais and Wittman 2014). This in turn is provoking new ways of asking questions about the ideas of and movements for food sovereignty (Edelman et al. 2014; Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2015; Shattuck, Schiavoni, and VanGelder 2015; Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe 2010).

Further complicating the mix and opening up new possibilities, social movements are no longer alone in their efforts toward food sovereignty. It is now on the agenda and up for debate in diverse spaces ranging from local food policy councils and other municipal bodies to intergovernmental forums such as the United Nations (UN) Committee on World Food Security, while researchers have identified approximately 15 countries to date where food sovereignty-inspired legislation has been adopted.<sup>1</sup> The formal entry of the state into food sovereignty politics, and the blurring of the lines between food sovereignty as a social movement aspiration and as a national policy objective, raises a number of challenging questions that have thus far been little explored. What happens to political projects and strategies when food sovereignty shifts, at least in part, from an oppositional demand by social movements into official policy in national laws/constitutions? How do state relations with various social groups, such as farmers and urban dwellers, change when a new political language becomes the norm? How do inherited ideas and practices around food production and provisioning change when inflected by the new shared objective of food sovereignty? How is the discourse of food sovereignty mobilized as part of competing political projects and strategies?<sup>2</sup>

Researchers of food sovereignty clearly have their work cut out for them in attempting to unravel these and other complex political dynamics, on top of unresolved debates around the concept itself. The aim of this piece is to point to possible directions forward for national-level food sovereignty studies, as part of a rapidly expanding and deepening agenda for food sovereignty research more broadly. In doing so, it builds upon important recent scholarly work in this area, identifying several common threads that are emerging, while also attempting to address a number of gaps in the recent literature. A key challenge is the role of the state in food sovereignty politics. That is, national-level food sovereignty construction inherently implicates the state, with the specifics of why, how and to what extent increasingly debated (Bernstein 2014; Edelman 2014; McKay, Nehring, and Walsh-Dilley 2014; Clark 2016; Patel 2009). Understanding such dynamics calls for new ways of theorizing, including a melding of the food sovereignty literature with the vast body of literature on the state. Indeed, some initial movement in this direction can be seen, two excellent examples being Clark (2016) and McKay, Nehring, and Walsh-Dilley (2014), although much more remains to be done. Building upon the limited body of work on food sovereignty and the state while addressing some of its limitations, we can push the boundary of knowledge generation significantly farther. In each of the contexts

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<sup>1</sup>Among these, Venezuela, Mali, Senegal, Nepal, Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua are recognized as being the first seven countries to adopt food sovereignty into the constitution and/or national law (Beauregard 2009). Menser (2014) describes Cuba as an example of 'state-supported food sovereignty'. Godek (2015) notes recent movement toward food sovereignty legislation in the Dominican Republic (see also FAO 2016). Wittman (2015) highlights Peru, Argentina, Guatemala, Brazil, El Salvador and Indonesia as having legislation supportive of food sovereignty efforts.

<sup>2</sup>Thanks to Harriet Friedmann for her assistance in articulating these questions.

where food sovereignty has been adopted into state policy, social actors played a critical role in the process. And, once the initial goal of policy adoption is achieved, their efforts do not end; they enter into a new arena of action. As Fox (2007) has noted, there is a long way to go between recognition of rights and actual implementation, and, ultimately, empowerment. The entry of the state into food sovereignty politics does not make it *the* protagonist of food sovereignty construction, but instead places it onto contested terrain with a host of other actors. To leave societal actors out of the analysis, or to include them only marginally, subsumed in a perspective that gives a commanding role to the state, is to construct, at best, an incomplete picture of food sovereignty vis-à-vis state policy in a given context, and runs the risk of flawed analysis.

This study aims to contribute to a still-emerging generation of literature which seeks to understand the actions of both state *and* societal actors involved in food sovereignty construction *in relation to each other over time*; an approach that takes the political *interaction* between the two broad sets of actors as a key reference point, a unit of analysis. This study argues that the actions of state actors with respect to food sovereignty can only be understood in dialectical relationship with the actions of societal actors (and vice versa). It situates these interactions as moving through time, both shaped by history and shaping history, thereby influencing what food sovereignty might actually look like and mean at a given moment in a given context. In taking this point of departure, an aim here is to address several common trends within the current literature that may be serving as barriers to a more complete analysis.

A first trend is not – or not sufficiently – situating present food sovereignty efforts as part of longer historical processes. When the starting point of a given analysis is the adoption of food sovereignty into national policy, rather than the contested processes leading up to it, it is easy to attribute to the state more protagonism in the construction of food sovereignty than may actually be the case. Furthermore, important pieces of context conditioning the challenges and possibilities of the present go missing.

A second trend is not – or not sufficiently – approaching present food sovereignty efforts as dynamic, ongoing and open ended. That is, there is a tendency to approach food sovereignty as an outcome as opposed to a process. Related is a tendency in both the literature and political debates to conflate food sovereignty with *efforts toward food sovereignty*. Yet if we follow the widely accepted distinction between democracy and democratization, the former being a vision and the latter being an attempt to realize it, something similar could be argued for food sovereignty versus food *sovereignization* – or, put more accessibly, food sovereignty *construction*. That is, what food sovereignty means and what it might look like, conceptually and in practice, are subject to ongoing processes of contestation and negotiation.

A related third trend is not – or not sufficiently – disaggregating the actors involved in food sovereignty construction and examining the interactions among them. This obscures the reality that food sovereignty construction is carried out by diverse sets of actors from within both state and society, and that it is the interactions among them that serve to drive forward – or block or constrain – food sovereignty.

Given the challenges presented above, frameworks are needed for approaching food sovereignty as a historically embedded, continually evolving set of processes that are inter-actively shaped by state and societal forces, reflecting competing paradigms and approaches. This study critically combines three emerging directions in food sovereignty research, which, taken together, can be employed as a *historical-relational-interactive (HRI)* framework for study of national-level food sovereignty construction. First is a *historical* approach to food sovereignty research, which recognizes the construction of food

sovereignty as continuous through time. Food sovereignty efforts are not seen as static, but as shaped by the history from which they arose and as continuing to ‘make history’ as they unfold over time. Second is a *relational* approach that reflects the open-ended and iterative nature of food sovereignty efforts; that is, that the very meanings of food sovereignty and pursuits toward it are dynamically shaped by competing paradigms and approaches. Third is an *interactive* approach, which situates food sovereignty construction as neither state-driven nor society-driven alone, but rather as a product of the interaction between and among diverse state and societal actors. The HRI framework will be further elaborated upon in the sections to follow. The case of Venezuela, one of a growing number of countries where food sovereignty has been adopted into state policy and among the longest-running experiments in its attempted construction, is used as an illustrative example. The proposed analytical framework, however, may have resonance beyond Venezuela, and, for that matter, even beyond Latin America, and may also be relevant to studies pitched at difference scales, whether international or subnational.

### **Food sovereignty construction in Venezuela**

The case of Venezuela, which the author has been researching over the past decade, is employed in this piece to inform both how food sovereignty is understood conceptually and how it is investigated by drawing insights from on-the-ground efforts to transform it from vision into reality. Rather than an enquiry into food sovereignty per se, this study is about efforts toward food sovereignty, partly to address the above-mentioned tendency to conflate the two. This is thus an investigation into food sovereignty construction, meaning how food sovereignty is being articulated and attempted, as well as contested – including resisted, refracted or reversed – in a given setting. The interest in the case of Venezuela is to address the gaps not only between theory and practice, but also between practice and theory. It is one thing to analyze a real-life scenario against existing definitions and conceptions of food sovereignty and point to divergences between visions and realities. But how can we understand and learn from convergences between visions and realities, with all the contradictions and messiness they entail? Put another way, that food sovereignty is difficult if not impossible to realize in most societies today is widely acknowledged and presents no puzzle. Existing structures and institutions constrain or obstruct efforts at constructing a radical alternative food system, while the political agency of social groups and state actors who seek to transform the food system may not be sufficiently strong or effective at a given time. Yet there are instances when efforts towards food sovereignty, against difficult odds, achieve significant gains, however partial and fragile. When and where this happens, how and why so? This is the puzzle that requires careful investigation.

In the case of Venezuela, a national food sovereignty effort, enshrined in state policy, was launched in 1999 through the process of social transformation known as the Bolivarian Revolution. Since then, the country has seen substantial public reinvestment in food and agriculture, along with new forms of citizen mobilization and participation in food politics. This includes the reduction of hunger by more than half through a series of state-supported feeding and food distribution programs (FAO 2015); the redistribution of arable land to over 1 million people through a state-led agrarian reform program (McKay, Nehring, and Walsh-Dilley 2014; Enríquez and Newman 2016); and the blossoming of citizen-run social institutions that are increasingly taking up matters of food sovereignty (McKay, Nehring, and Walsh-Dilley 2014; Schiavoni 2015). How did these openings come to be, how are they being navigated, and what broader lessons do they hold for other contexts?

On the flip side, understanding food sovereignty construction requires understanding the forces that are pulling away from it together with those that are pushing toward it. What are the specific ways in which food sovereignty is being constrained or blocked? Part of what makes the Venezuelan case fascinating and relevant is that it is home to some of the most inhospitable conditions for food sovereignty – conditions directly inherited from the pre-revolutionary past – with nearly 90 percent of its population living in urban areas (World Bank n.d.); over 95 percent of its export revenue derived from petroleum (Lander 2014); food import rates as high as 80 percent in recent decades (FAO 2002); and mounting public health concerns linked to diet (Briceño-Iragorry, Gabriela, and Alexandra 2012). The situation with respect to food sovereignty construction in Venezuela is thus highly complex, particularly at this given moment. On the one hand, in 2013 hunger levels were recognized by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as being at historic lows, an achievement that has been an explicit aim of the Bolivarian government, as mandated by the national constitution (FAO 2013). On the other hand, building up a secure and sustainable domestic food supply from which to feed the population, also mandated by the constitution, has proven much more challenging to achieve. As put by a Venezuelan peasant leader, ‘We know that food security is achieved through resources. But food sovereignty has to be a process coming from the bottom up – from the peasant, from the communities’ (Schiavoni 2015, 474).

This comment underscores the fact that Venezuela’s advances in food security in recent years rest on a highly precarious food system that continues to rely heavily on imports of industrially produced food, facilitated by petrodollars. This makes the transformational efforts associated with food sovereignty both particularly challenging and urgent. The cracks in the current system became especially apparent recently, in the form of shortages of basic food items throughout the country, resulting in daily lines outside most major grocery outlets, as people queued up to access basic items such as pre-cooked corn flour, sugar and cooking oil. While periodic food shortages are nothing new in Venezuela, the most recent wave of shortages intensified into a mounting national crisis immediately prior to the parliamentary elections of December 2015, and are widely perceived as being a factor in the outcome of these elections, in which the majority of seats shifted from the Bolivarian (*chavista*) government to the political opposition. The shortages are intensifying at the time of this writing. Pro-government forces point to manufactured scarcity in the form of intentional withholding of food by private chains aligned with the political opposition, which control much of the supply chain, along with diversion of goods to a parallel illicit market which speculates on the price of commodities. Opposition forces point to a dwindling supply of dollars through economic mismanagement by the government. A key issue acknowledged across the board is the dramatic drop in petroleum prices in recent years, upon which Venezuela depends for its foreign exchange, with the prices plummeting from around USD 100 per barrel in 2013 down to USD 30 per barrel in January 2016 (EIA 2016).

In such a moment of crisis, it is not an understatement to say that food politics are among the most decisive issues influencing broader politics in Venezuela – and the very future of the Bolivarian Revolution. How is food sovereignty being debated and framed in such a context? How are historically contingent challenges impacting the contemporary construction of food sovereignty, and to what extent are they being addressed? What are the proposals being put forward, and what character and extent of structural and institutional transformation do these entail? Who are the actors involved in food sovereignty construction, and where do their interests, visions and efforts converge and diverge, and why? These

are interrelated broad questions for those seeking to theoretically understand, and/or politically contribute to, efforts toward food sovereignty.

To tackle the above-described puzzle of food sovereignty construction in Venezuela will require the interlinked analytical lenses of HRI. First, a historical lens allows us to understand the social structures and institutions that condition the politics of food over time and the ways in which the agency of relevant state and societal actors has been, and continues to be, enhanced and exercised, or not, in the political contestation over the transformation of the food system. In the case of Venezuela, for instance, the question of how food sovereignty came to be put on the national agenda in 1999 tends to be assumed as a political given in a socialist revolutionary project – rather than empirically investigated and demonstrated – and is thus little documented and examined. It has similarly gone largely unexplored how the conjunctural situation at present and its political and electoral implications have emerged directly from past conditions and what are the threads connecting the past, present and future of food politics in Venezuela. Second, a relational lens allows us to capture the process-oriented nature of food sovereignty – that is, the ways in which the very meanings and attempted practices of food sovereignty are being dynamically and contentiously shaped and reshaped over time. In Venezuela, as with elsewhere, there is no one singular conception of food sovereignty. This lens also reflects the multidimensionality and fluidity of food sovereignty as a concept and the ways in which it interacts with other concepts and ideas. Third, an interactive lens allows us to more fully analyze how actors within the state and in society are dialectically linked, shaping the construction of food sovereignty through their interactions – and in turn influencing the degrees to which food sovereignty is advanced, constrained and/or blocked. To understand food sovereignty construction in Venezuela or elsewhere, it is not sufficient to focus on either the state or society, one to the exclusion of the other, but instead on how they are interacting and mutually influencing each other. The pages to follow will further elaborate upon each of these lenses and how they can be employed toward a fuller understanding of the dynamics at play in the attempted construction of food sovereignty in Venezuela.

### **Food sovereignty construction through time: a historical approach**

The starting point of many narratives on food sovereignty in Venezuela is the adoption of food sovereignty into state policy in 1999 at the start of its political process known as the Bolivarian Revolution. The Bolivarian Revolution set into motion a variety of reforms by state actors, while also presenting some significant openings for previously marginalized sectors and classes (namely, the urban and rural working class) of society. While 1999 was indeed a defining moment for efforts toward food sovereignty in Venezuela, the adoption of food sovereignty into state policy did not happen in a vacuum, nor does the story begin in 1999. Instead, it is rooted in decades-long and even centuries-long struggles over land, food and other basic rights by societal actors vis-à-vis processes of state-building through the periods of colonization, struggles for independence and, most recently, democratization.

A pivotal moment in these struggles in recent history was the popular uprising of 1989 known as the Caracazo, when, on the 27th of February, hundreds of thousands of people poured down into the capital from the impoverished hillside communities on the periphery of Caracas, protesting in the streets as they looted shops first for food, then for other basic goods, then for basically anything in sight (Hardy 2007; Nuñez Nuñez 1990). The protest was precipitated by President Carlos Andrés Pérez signing a deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to enter Venezuela into a structural adjustment program, against a backdrop of prior neoliberal reforms, causing an abrupt surge in food and fuel prices in

which the cost of bread rose by over 600 percent (Hardy 2007).<sup>3</sup> Maya (2003) emphasizes, however, that while the Caracazo is often treated as a spontaneous mass riot, in fact, anti-neoliberal student protests had been steadily intensifying in the days prior, and on this particular day, these were first joined by certain groups of workers before later being joined by the masses at large. The President's response to the massive mobilization of this day was to authorize the security forces to use lethal force. The official death toll was 276 civilians, with actual deaths estimated to be much higher. Similar events transpired in cities across Venezuela on the same day. The Caracazo is credited with being not only one of the earliest public manifestations against neoliberalism, but also a defining moment of popular power that ushered in a politically heated decade and paved the way for the rise of the Bolivarian Revolution, with the election of Hugo Chávez Frías at the end of 1998 (Maya 2003; Hardy 2007; Ciccariello-Maher 2013).

The experience of the Caracazo indicates the political nature of food in Venezuela much prior to the Bolivarian Revolution. Tellingly, among the slogans heard or scrawled on walls that day were "The people are hungry", "The people are angry" and "No more deception" (Maya 2003, 126). Furthermore, the conditions that had given rise to the Caracazo were connected to food and agrarian politics of the past. The shantytowns covering the hills of Caracas can be seen as a visual representation of Venezuela's withdrawal from agriculture as the country's petroleum industry was developed from the early 1900s onward. As attention turned to oil, both the land-owning upper classes and the government lost interest in agriculture and largely withdrew from investing in it. The flight of capital from the countryside was accompanied by a mass exodus of campesinos (peasants and rural workers), who poured into the Caracas and other urban hubs (Gilbert 2004; Wilpert 2006). With little work to be found, many ended up on the edge of existence, living in extreme poverty and arguably fitting the characteristics of 'surplus populations', as described by Li (2010). Furthermore, the abandonment of agriculture together with an inflow of dollars from petroleum revenue led to a cycle of dependency upon imported foods, leading Venezuela to become the first country in the region to be a net food importer (Wilpert 2006), procuring from abroad as much as 80 percent of its food in recent decades (FAO 2002). These conditions put

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<sup>3</sup>The signing of a deal with the IMF was just a part of an unfolding situation, though a critical part. On the eve of the Caracazo, the overall socio-economic situation was bad. 'The rate of inflation, historically in single-digit, reached 8.0 percent in 1987 and 29.48 percent in 1988. [ . . . ] By 1988, the public external debt had reached US\$26.6 billion' (Lander and Fierro 1996, 51). This forced the government to sign a deal with the IMF in exchange for debt restructuring, and the Structural Adjustment Program had the following requirements:

- (1) restriction in public expenditure, (2) restriction of wage levels; (3) unification of the exchange-rate regime, with a single floating exchange rate; (4) flexible interest rates, an immediate increase in the level of regulated interest rates, elimination of preferential-interest-rate loans for the agricultural sector, and market determination of interest rates as soon as possible; (5) reduction of price control; (6) postponement of low-priority public investment program; (7) reduction of subsidies; (8) introduction of a sales tax; (9) adjustment of the prices of the goods and services provided by state enterprises, including oil products in the domestic market; and (10) reform of trade policy, including the elimination of most of the exceptions in the tariff system, and liberalization of imports. (Lander and Fierro 1996, 52)

This deserves an extended footnoting because it is important to refresh our memory of the circumstances in the build-up toward the Caracazo in 1989, and the Caracazo itself, because these would largely influence state policy towards some of these key issues from 1999 onward.



Venezuela's food supply in the hands of a number of companies that controlled its lucrative food importation and distribution apparatus – a powerful apparatus which remains largely intact to this day (Schiavoni and Camacaro 2016). This also fostered a highly precarious situation with respect to food access for those living in poverty, who by 1998 made up 55 percent of the population (Weisbrot 2008).

If the urban struggles connected to the Caracazo can help to explain the strong prioritization given to food access and other immediate material needs at the start of the Bolivarian Revolution in the form of feeding programs and subsidized food outlets, it is also important to look to the peasant struggles in the countryside as important factors contributing to the current process for agrarian reform. The latter forms another important component of Venezuela's food sovereignty process, with an estimated 5.5 million hectares of arable land redistributed to over a million people thus far, along with accompanying support in the form of training and technical assistance, credit, inputs and marketing support (McKay, Nehring, and Walsh-Dilley 2014; Enríquez 2013; Enríquez and Newman 2016). Mobilizations of peasant movements, including two member groups of La Vía Campesina, have been key to these gains. These movements date back to nineteenth-century peasant struggles over inequitable land distribution patterns established during the period of Spanish colonization, perpetuated and reinforced by landed classes and other elites following independence (Ciccariello-Maher 2013; Wilpert 2006).

To fail to take into account the rich history of resistance around food, land and agriculture in Venezuela is to miss the ways in which persisting structures and institutions built in the past – and resistance to them – are shaping what is transpiring at present. It also risks perceiving current efforts toward food sovereignty as originating solely from, and orchestrated mainly by, the state as opposed to emerging from an interactive relationship between the state and society, grounded in decades of resistance and social movement-building alongside and in response to state-building processes. The point is that while it is the interaction between state and societal actors that determines the character, pace and trajectory of food sovereignty construction, it is usually the persistent and pervasive social mobilizations and demands from below by a variety of social groups that get food sovereignty onto the official agenda, and keep it there. While definitely not a sufficient condition for food sovereignty construction, they are a fundamentally necessary one for the incorporation of food sovereignty into the official state agenda.

An illustration of the above point is when, in 2010, a farmer leader of a cooperative in the agricultural state of Yaracuy was asked by a researcher whether he agreed with the wording pertaining to food sovereignty in the national constitution. 'Do we agree with it?!', he replied. 'We're the ones who fought to get it in there in the first place!', 'we' being the peasant movement of which he was part.<sup>4</sup> This serves as a vivid reminder that food sovereignty is only enshrined in national policy as a result of decades of struggle on the part of social movements, which continue to be key protagonists of food sovereignty construction under the Bolivarian Revolution. A similar scenario exists in other countries where food sovereignty has been adopted into state policy (e.g., see Giunta 2014 and Godek 2015 on the role of social movements in pushing for the adoption and subsequent implementation of food sovereignty policies in Ecuador and Nicaragua, respectively). This connects to a point made by Gaventa and McGee – partly in dialogue with the idea of 'political opportunity structure' in explaining state and societal actors' role in contentious politics (Tarrow 1998) – that 'This historical view challenges the idea of political

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<sup>4</sup>Personal communication, July 2010.

opportunities as openings created from above to which activists merely respond. Rather ... the process is more cyclical in nature' (Gaventa and McGee 2010, 14). They add that 'What appears a new political opportunity may in fact have been shaped by previous collective mobilization and action – or, as Gamson and Meyer put it, "opportunities open the way for political action, but movements make opportunities"' (Gaventa and McGee 2010, 14). Indeed, a historical lens can help us understand and appreciate the much longer trajectory of which current food sovereignty efforts are a part, and the critical role of social movements in having shaped, and in continuing to shape, this trajectory in an interactive relationship with the state.

From what has been elaborated thus far, one can begin to see how Venezuela's food politics have been shaped by patterns extending from the past, such as oil exploitation, urban poverty and waves of social unrest. Furthermore, there are a number of questions that begin to emerge that require systematic historical analysis. Why did the Venezuelan government adopt food sovereignty as a national policy in 1999? This implies not taking as unproblematic the general assumption that it was the logical manifestation in food policy of the Bolivarian Revolution that got started that year. What kinds of food policy and politics (including cheap food, and food provisioning in times of crisis) emerged historically, why, and with what implications for contemporary food politics? How and why have relevant social structures and institutions partly shaped the degree of autonomy and capacity – or political agency – of traditionally marginalized social classes, and how have the latter in turn reshaped social structures and institutions? These questions and related ones point to the importance of applying a historical lens to food sovereignty construction in Venezuela. Tilly (2006, 417) cautions that 'explanatory political science can hardly get anywhere without relying on careful historical analysis'. The remainder of this section will explore what this practically means for food sovereignty research.

To begin, what is meant by a historical lens? Is it simply a matter of looking back into the past? Collier and Mazzuca emphasize that, 'The distinctive feature of history is *time* – a focus on the temporal dimensions of political occurrences and processes' (2006, 473–74, emphasis in original). They thus put forward four key ideas with respect to time in politics. First is *history as period*, which refers to understanding political phenomena in socially defined intervals of time. Second is *history as conjuncture*, which refers to 'a temporal coincidence of a potentially limitless number of forces, actors, structures, and events'. Third is the importance of the *timing* with which political phenomena occur, and fourth is the idea of *change over time*. Abrams (1982, xvi) similarly underscores the centrality of time to historical analysis: 'It was not so much the relevance of history that sociologists failed to see as the relevance of time ... the fact that history happens in time'. He further elaborates that fundamental to historical analysis is a 'problematic of structuring' – that is, attempts to understand the multifaceted relationship between structure and agency, which is 'something that is continuously constructed in time. It makes the continuous process of construction the focal concern of social analysis' (Abrams 1982, 16).

From these perspectives, one can begin to appreciate history as having just as much to do with the present and future as it does with the past. Or, as Hobsbawm (1972, 16) put it, history can be understood as 'the unity of past, present and future'. This implies moving beyond the stale treatment of history as background or as context, to a much more dynamic perspective on the ways in which history is shaping the present and future. Abrams thus cautions against approaches in which history is relegated to a chapter on historical background, which can often leave the rest of the analysis quite ahistorical, instead calling for a more integrated approach:

Doing justice to the reality of history is not a matter of noting the way in which the past provides a background to the present; it is a matter of treating what people do in the present as a struggle to create a future *out of* the past, of seeing that the past is not just the womb of the present but the only raw material out of which the present can be constructed. (1982, 8, emphasis in original)

There are several more general points worth underscoring with regards to constructing a historical lens, before getting back to the specifics of Venezuela. One has to do with how we understand and analyze events. Just as our understanding of history should not be relegated to the past, neither should the events comprising history. Jackson (2006) makes two important points regarding this. First is that events can – and should – be considered part of history from the moment they happen. This is a point which will be returned to below. Second, even when an event has occurred in the past, how it is understood, recalled, and analyzed is a continual process extending into the present. Thus, according to Jackson, there is often ‘a methodological disposition to focus on events as discrete happenings taking place outside of the process of conceptualizing them ...’ whereas

the irreducible historicity of events suggests an alternative way to proceed: instead of working with events as presumptively stable entities, we should focus on the ongoing dynamic process of *eventing* whereby the contours of an event are produced and reproduced ... (2006, 498, emphasis in original)

Jackson describes ‘eventing’ as a form of social negotiation, which can also be likened to Tilly’s (2002, 116) notion of ‘contentious conversation’, which ‘proceeds through incessant improvisation within limits set by the previous histories and relations of particular interlocutors’. This brings us to the last general point here, which has to do with the highly imperfect and contested nature of historical knowledge itself. Hobsbawm (1972, 3) reminds us that ‘what is officially defined as ‘the past’ clearly is and must be a particular selection from the infinity of what is remembered or capable of being remembered’.

Following the last point above, a study of national-level food sovereignty construction cannot tackle the complete history of a given country relevant to the study of contemporary food sovereignty initiatives there. Rather, a historical lens will by necessity need to be selective, focusing in on certain key questions, such as those posed earlier in this section. Here the work of Edelman and Leon (2013) may be instructive. In their case for greater historical analysis of contemporary global land grabbing, they argue for the importance of: (1) an understanding of interconnected historical cycles, shaped by both regional and global dynamics of capital accumulation; (2) a ‘baseline’ understanding of how pre-existing conditions (prior to the current land rush) may be shaping current patterns; and (3) an understanding of the present as being part of history. While specifically responding to the body of literature on land grabbing, these points readily translate over to the need for deeper historical analysis of food sovereignty construction.

The first point is that

land grabbing tends to occur in cycles, or waves, depending on historically specific regional and global dynamics of capital accumulation. Each new cycle has had to take into account and is profoundly shaped by pre-existing social formations and local and regional particularities. (Edelman and Leon 2013, 1697)

This is relevant to food politics in Venezuela in that recent challenges – shortages, food price spikes, inflation – are nothing new and have been seen cyclically, through an interplay

between global and national economic processes, since the country's shift to a petroleum economy from the 1930s onward (Lander and Fierro 1996; Gouveia 1997; Maya 2003). Along with the emergence of the oil economy came a relationship between the steady decline of the autonomy and capacity for domestic food production on the one hand, and the increasing reliance on cheap imported food items on the other hand, in order to feed an increasingly urbanized, non-farming population. This was facilitated by a steady flow of revenue from oil exports and the availability of cheap food made possible through subsidized overproduction in the US beginning in the 1950s (Carbonell and Rothman 1977). Thus, the double attraction of a high global demand for oil and the availability of cheap industrially produced food on the global market contributed to Venezuela's national food system being inserted firmly into the global political economy. Such terms of insertion render countries like Venezuela vulnerable to oil and food price fluctuations, partly caused by available surplus food supply, stronger control by private corporations on global-national food supply/pricing, and/or domestic inflation (Lander 2014).

The second point relates to a tendency in the land grab literature to attribute to land grabs effects which 'might plausibly have predated today's land deals, might have other causes or might have happened anyway' (Edelman and Leon 2013, 1698). Therefore, '[i]nformation on land uses and livelihoods that existed before the implementation of a land deal is essential for assessing any transaction's short or medium-term impact' (Edelman and Leon 2013, 1698). As related to food sovereignty construction in Venezuela, this point is connected to the prior one in terms of recognizing the ways in which patterns persisting from the past are continuing to shape food politics, and to condition the construction of food sovereignty. Thus, as argued above, to take 1999 as the starting point for analysis of food sovereignty efforts under the Bolivarian Revolution is to miss the ways in which longer-term historical patterns are supporting and/or hindering the advancement of food sovereignty. As already emphasized, a key factor here is the orientation of the Venezuelan economy around petroleum and the ensuing implications for labor, demographics, food provisioning and general patterns of accumulation. To understand how these patterns have persisted over time, it is helpful to examine the role of institutions, as 'both formal organizations and informal rules and procedures that structure conduct' (Thelen and Steinmo 1992, 1). Roseberry (1983, 123) explains that during the first phase of Venezuela's petroleum industry development, from 1920 to 1936, 'the development of economically important state institutions was an aspect of the growth of the state'. While these institutions evolved and morphed over the years, they continued to reinforce a system that, on the one hand, prioritized petroleum production at the expense of other industries, including agriculture, while, on the other hand, supporting capital-intensive modes of production for what remained of the country's agriculture sector (Roseberry 1983). Enríquez (2013) explains that within the Bolivarian Revolution, the clash of old power represented by the country's elites and new power represented by popular movements can be seen both within and across institutions of the state, and that deeply entrenched power relations that continue to be institutionalized to varying degrees remain among the greatest barriers to the advancement of food sovereignty.

The third point has to do with 'viewing contemporary processes as the history – conceptually and methodologically speaking – of the present' (Edelman and Leon 2013, 1698). This point is fundamental to food sovereignty construction in that it is precisely about trying to change the course of history – that is, the cycles that have up to the present driven hunger and poverty – and to build something new. Or, to borrow from Marx (1994), people are indeed 'making history' (in attempting to put food sovereignty into practice), while at the same time 'they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past'. Key

to this process is the above-mentioned interplay between structure and agency. In the case of Venezuela, there are certainly some major structural barriers, both national and globally, standing in the way of food sovereignty. This is part of what makes Venezuela such an important case to examine. These structures, however, do not predetermine the outcomes of food sovereignty efforts, even if they shape them in important ways. Relevant here is the work of Figueroa (2015, 505), who sees the seeds for food sovereignty being sown in the spaces where capitalism has not fully penetrated, in the acts of subsistence and survival of ‘everyday life’, which she describes as ‘an ongoing, living process [that] is continually ‘leaking out the sides’, so to speak, of capitalist structures; its ‘residue’ confounding the attempts of abstraction and alienation to contain it’. She argues that people’s ‘everyday life’ practices around food, often born out of techniques for survival under capitalism, contain the seeds for transcending capitalism’s grip on the food system and other realms of life, and the seeds for building contextually meaningful forms of food sovereignty. While Figueroa draws her research from Chicago’s South Side neighborhood, her insights bear resonance for Venezuela, where nearly 90 percent of the population are urban dwellers, the majority descended from those displaced from the countryside in past decades. It is thus particularly relevant to Venezuela when she asks:

what does it mean to preserve ‘traditional’ ways of life, or ‘peasant spaces’, in a situation where people are far removed from any kind of referents for what these mean in practice, and where they may not have any immediate knowledge, experience, or even desire to engage with them? In a global metropolis, the diversity of experiences that exist within even a limited local context can imply very different meanings of food sovereignty for various communities. (Figueroa 2015, 499)

These insights can help us to appreciate that there are in fact diverse histories within the historical narrative of food sovereignty in Venezuela, and that out of these diverse histories emerge equally diverse contextually specific articulations of food sovereignty. This can also help us to appreciate, and to empirically investigate, how some of the solutions coming from the grassroots level, which are often left out of the analysis, may in fact be providing important building blocks for food sovereignty that are not inconsequential. An example from Venezuela is a return to local culinary traditions in the face of recent shortages of various industrially processed food staples such as pre-cooked corn flour. These practices are in turn being taken up and promoted by social movements, for instance through a popular monthly fair in Caracas featuring alternative homemade products. The movements involved see this as a means of confronting the ‘economic war’ they feel is being waged by elements of the political opposition, while also carving out greater independence from the industrial food system, supporting better nutrition, and further deepening and radicalizing national food sovereignty efforts. In this example, we can see how current structures are conditioning the responses emerging with respect to food sovereignty construction, while these responses also hold possibility for transforming current structures.

In summary, the structures both hindering and supporting food sovereignty construction in Venezuela are to be taken seriously, and key among these are the structures, both global and domestic, upholding Venezuela’s petroleum-based economy and associated food importation complex. And yet, through both record high and record low oil prices since 1999, the government has steadily invested in food and agriculture programs, in a radical break from pre-1999, and both social movements and citizen groups have continued their efforts toward food sovereignty. An understanding of agency, and the interplay between structure and agency as mediated by institutions (Thelen and Steinmo 1992),

thus becomes critically important to the analysis. What are the ways in which agency is being exerted by various actors of both society and state, within, through, against and/or outside of existing structures? This gets into the question of strategies for effecting change, which brings us into the next prong of the HRI framework, *relational*.

### **Food sovereignty construction as process: a relational approach**

A second common trend in the literature is related to the first in not situating present food sovereignty efforts as being in motion through time, but here the issue has more to do with not looking forward than not looking back. That is, it has to do with a tendency to view present food sovereignty efforts as more of a final outcome than as a particular snapshot in time that could go in any number of directions. The second prong of the HRI framework, *relational*, thus builds upon the first, *historical*, in that it also starts from an understanding of food sovereignty construction as unfolding in time. This particular lens looks at the ways in which the very meanings of food sovereignty and approaches toward it are dynamically being shaped – and mutually shaping each other – in the process of its construction. Since there is no predetermined path for food sovereignty, it must be defined and articulated *as* it is being constructed, through processes that are open-ended, iterative, creative and contentious. What would food sovereignty actually look like for Venezuela? What is the vision? What are the respective roles of state and societal forces in this vision? Of urban and rural populations? What model(s) of agriculture form the basis of food sovereignty? What are the roles and meanings attached to food in this process? Is food sovereignty considered a means of ‘feeding the revolution’ or a revolution within the revolution – or both? How transformative in nature is the vision of food sovereignty for Venezuela? How much of a break from the current system does it imply? And how to get there?

There is of course no single answer to these questions, and responses will vary greatly depending upon who is asked. Even among those who support food sovereignty in principle, it takes on a variety of meanings, with different perspectives on how to build it, and these perspectives are in ongoing dialogue and tension with one another. Thus, in Venezuela, and elsewhere, there is no singular, unified vision or project for food sovereignty, but rather multiple, overlapping, and often competing efforts. Perhaps this explains, at least partly, Bernstein’s (2014) observation that studies of food sovereignty in Venezuela have varied significantly to date. Much depends on how food sovereignty is being defined, what is being observed and through which analytical lenses. For instance, in his study of Venezuela’s state-run agricultural enterprises, Kappeler (2013) finds that they are based on large-scale, industrial production and organized hierarchically, with producers viewed more as factory workers than as peasants, or *campesinos*. He thus argues that ‘Although official rhetoric rarely if ever acknowledges the divergence of reality on the ground from the peasant line of La Vía Campesina, in practical terms, the model of agriculture created by the government represents a distinct form of food sovereignty’ (Kappeler 2013, 16), characterizing the latter as a form of ‘Fordist Neopopulism’ (Kappeler 2013, 17).

Kappeler generates some critically important insights into the challenging dynamics of state involvement in food sovereignty construction in his analysis of an under-examined approach to food sovereignty construction in Venezuela. However, his characterization of the state-run enterprises as *the* approach to food sovereignty reflective of *the* food sovereignty pursued by the Venezuelan state under the Bolivarian Revolutionary government implies, perhaps unintentionally, that there is a singular stand-alone approach by the

Venezuelan state towards radical food system transformation. Yet the state-run enterprise initiative is one of many competing approaches being adopted by the government, approaches which differ quite fundamentally, and which tend to be dynamically altered over time. An illustration of this can be found in Kappeler's explanation that the promotion of state-run agricultural enterprises was partly sparked in response to the limitations faced by a prior push by the government for farmer-run cooperatives earlier on in the agrarian reform process. This initiative, he explains, largely failed to reach its desired aims due to challenges including barriers in knowledge and technology transfer, economic unviability, and an inability of the government to attract and retain sufficient participants, together with a lack of alignment between the interests of the government and those of participants. This combination of factors, according to Kappeler, is among the reasons behind the shift toward agricultural enterprises entailing more direct oversight of state actors (see also Page 2010; Clark 2010). And yet it bears emphasis that these enterprises exist alongside the persisting state-supported cooperatives, and together with a host of urban and peri-urban farming initiatives, as well as other forms of food production taking place via citizen-run social institutions, each of which is supported through multiple, and in some cases clashing, government initiatives. Thus, Venezuela's state-run enterprises may be better seen as an expression, at a given moment in time, of competing approaches and paradigms – that are a logical manifestation of a contested state. The point raised above builds on the fundamental assumption of this study about the need to differentiate, empirically and analytically, between food sovereignty and efforts towards it.

The dynamics at play behind clashing government-supported initiatives around food and agriculture in Venezuela are captured well in another recent food sovereignty-related study of Venezuela, by Enríquez and Newman (2016). Interestingly, they assert that the government's food sovereignty agenda has in fact given way to a new agenda of 'nationalist food security', from 2010 onward. They argue that this is evidenced in part by continued reliance upon food imports, along with a preference toward sourcing from large-scale operations for food that is purchased domestically, for the government-run food programs. They summarize the main reasons they see behind 'the national state's inability to attain food sovereignty' as 'a lack of agency-level capacity, inter-agency conflict, and the persistence of the old property structure' (Enríquez and Newman 2016, 621). While these structures and institutions are indeed fundamentally important constraining and hindering factors in efforts toward food sovereignty, the conclusion around a 'nationalist food security' agenda can be misplaced. Several questions are raised by this argument. First are fundamental questions about the concept of food sovereignty itself. Is food sovereignty best understood as a state of being that can be attained, or does such a conceptualization reduce it from the complex and dynamic process, or set of processes, that others have argued it to be (Edelman et al. 2014; Iles and Montenegro de Wit 2015; Shattuck, Schiavoni, and Van-Gelder 2015; McKay, Nehring, and Walsh-Dilley 2014), and hence serve to reduce its transformative potential? McKay, Nehring, and Walsh-Dilley (2014, 1177) have argued, for instance, that 'Food sovereignty cannot be conceived of as a finite outcome; it is a political space and terrain of struggle around control over food systems'. Furthermore, does the implication that food sovereignty is a condition to be attained by the national state risk invisibilizing the inherently key role of non-state actors in food sovereignty construction? We will come back to this shortly.

Regarding the point on the perceived agenda shift by the Venezuelan government from food sovereignty to food security, Enríquez and Newman raise important issues that get to the heart of debates around food sovereignty. For instance, what place, if any, do food imports and long-distance trade have in food sovereignty construction? This is a matter

indeed worth critical interrogation, as some have already begun to do (e.g., Edelman et al. 2014; Burnett and Murphy 2014). However, similar to the points raised above with regard to Kappeler's study, it bears asking whether strategies such as food importation indeed represent a unidirectional shift on the part of the government (i.e., away from food sovereignty and toward food security) or if this might be perceived as one of several competing strategies, including what Marcano Marin and Ellner (2015) describe as 'pragmatic' approaches, on the part of the government given in the face of current circumstances such as intensifying food shortages at the particular moment in time. That there is an ongoing policy for food importation, continued from the past, by the government is one thing. Which policy direction it is dynamically moving towards or away from is another. I argue that it is problematic to conclude that government policies are moving away from food sovereignty towards more conventional nationalist food security when a mix of approaches can be observed – some of which reflect an effort to break away from the pre-1999 past towards food sovereignty, however uneven, slow, partial and non-unilinear the direction of the process has been. In this sense, Venezuela precisely fits the category of traditionally food-deficit countries that are pressured to embark on importation of cheap food to partially meet their food needs – that in turn face difficult dilemmas in food system transformations, and pose complicated challenges for food sovereignty advocates, as explained by Edelman et al. (2014). I also argue that it is problematic to conclude that there is any unified policy of the government when it comes to food and agriculture, as opposed to multiple and competing policies, as Enriquez and Newman's findings would appear to support.

Another important question raised by Enriquez and Newman's study is the extent to which food security and food sovereignty are mutually exclusive, in theory and/or in practice, if indeed they are. In the Venezuelan context, for instance, the two are often seen going hand-in-hand in public policies, discourse and practice – as seen, for example, with the national Organic Law of Food Security and Sovereignty of 2008, in which both concepts are embedded. This interplay between food security and food sovereignty seen in Venezuela and elsewhere (see, for instance, Godek 2015 on the case of Nicaragua) connects to broader theoretical debates around the relationships between the two concepts. While there has been a tendency in these debates to paint the two as oppositional to each other (e.g., Schanbacher 2010), some scholars are beginning to make a case for moving away from a dichotomous take (e.g., Edelman 2014; Clapp 2014; Murphy 2014; Jarosz 2014). Clapp (2014), for instance, argues that the two concepts serve distinct functions and that food security is a more open-ended concept than the characterizations often attributed to it in the food sovereignty literature, making a plea to move beyond binaries. In a similar vein, Edelman (2014, 967) adds that, 'in its origins and its contemporary expressions, "food sovereignty" intersects considerably and sometimes even converges with "food security". Both have been protean concepts, frequently imprecise, always contested and in ongoing processes of semantic and political evolution'. Given these more expansive ways of thinking on food security and food sovereignty, perhaps rather than analyzing whether one approach has displaced another in a given context, it might be more useful to examine the extent to which these two approaches are clashing, converging and mutually shaping each other. This is where a relational lens can be helpful for moving beyond binaries and appreciating food sovereignty construction as consisting of competing elements that coproduce and co-shape each other in dynamic ways.

A relational lens can also help us to appreciate the unfolding nature of food sovereignty construction and not to miss or discount efforts toward it that do not fit a certain mold. As Shattuck, Schiavoni, and VanGelder explain, building upon calls for relational



approaches to food sovereignty by Iles and Montenegro de Wit (2015) and Figueroa (2015):<sup>5</sup>

A more relational approach to sovereignty moves away from an ideal, typified notion of what food sovereignty is or is not, focusing instead on how efforts to build food sovereignty change the ways in which power is structured and experienced in people's everyday lives. This allows us to see that food sovereignty does not have to – and will not – look the same everywhere ... these differences are the product of local history, identity, cultural memory, and political moments. (Shattuck, Schiavoni, and VanGelder 2015, 427)

Key here is approaching food sovereignty as process as opposed to outcome. It is too soon to draw any conclusions on what food sovereignty does or does not look like for Venezuela, as this is being actively debated and shaped, without any pre-determined pathway, by the many actors involved. Indeed, the jury is very much out on the future trajectories of the food sovereignty efforts currently underway in Venezuela, and here it is argued that it is the *processes* shaping these trajectories as we speak that are in fact most interesting and instructive to learn from.

So what does it mean to apply a relational lens to food sovereignty construction? According to Emirbayer (1997, 281) in 'Manifesto for a relational sociology', a relational lens depicts social reality 'in dynamic, continuous, and processual terms' and 'sees relations between terms or units as preeminently dynamic in nature, as unfolding, ongoing processes rather than as static ties among inert substances' (Emirbayer 1997, 289). Furthermore, he adds that from a relational perspective, 'the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction. The latter, seen as a dynamic, unfolding process, becomes the primary unit of analysis ...' (Emirbayer 1997, 287).

It is important to underscore that relational here refers not only to relationships among the actors engaged in food sovereignty (which will be further addressed in the next section, on an *interactive lens*), but also to relationships among the very concepts, paradigms and approaches comprising food sovereignty construction. With a dynamically evolving concept such as food sovereignty, the ideas and meanings attached to it are co-evolving and co-constituting each other. This notion is captured by Somers (1995, 136), who argues that 'the most important definitional shift in an historical sociology of concept formation is away from thinking about a concept as a singular categorical expression to regarding concepts as embedded in complex relational networks that are both intersubjective and public ...'. She adds that 'What appear to be autonomous categories defined by their

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<sup>5</sup>This study builds upon several important prior studies that have called for a relational approach to understanding food sovereignty construction. Iles and Montenegro (2013, 2) describe the concept of sovereignty embedded in food sovereignty as 'an intrinsically relational concept, only taking on meaning in relation to other processes, functions, and forms – not least, other sovereign units'. This is particularly relevant, they argue, for understanding and analyzing food sovereignty construction across multiple scales, which they further explore in an equally insightful subsequent piece (Iles and Montenegro de Wit 2015). Figueroa calls for 'a relational conception of food as a nexus of multiple, intersecting social-historical processes' (Figueroa 2015, 498). She adds:

Thinking about food relationally is useful not only for an analysis of what went into its physical production, but also for the production of meaning through food practices, and their capacity to produce and reproduce social relations in general through the lived experience of obtaining, preparing, and consuming food. (502)

attributes are reconceived more accurately as historically shifting sets of relationships that are contingently stabilized' (Somers 1995, 136).

This perspective is relevant to food sovereignty on a number of levels. First, food sovereignty as a concept and an idea has been and continues to be shaped through its interactions with other concepts and ideas. Going back to food security and food sovereignty, the two concepts derive much of their meaning from their relationship to each other. Food sovereignty as it is known today arose in large part in response to the perceived failures of food security approaches (Patel 2009) and thus has been deeply shaped by perceptions of what food security is and is not. The relationship between the two is more complex than one simply being a critique of the other, however, in that elements of food security have been reflected in the various definitions of food sovereignty from early on (Edelman 2014), particularly in the most widely recognized definition from 2007.<sup>6</sup> And, on the flip side, with the emergence of food sovereignty, discourse around food security would never be quite the same. Patel (2009) points out that the broadened definition of food security (to include issues of nutrition, social control and public health) adopted at the 1996 World Food Summit was in fact influenced by the simultaneous launching of food sovereignty there by La Via Campesina. The influence of food sovereignty has similarly permeated food security dialogues from the UN Committee on World Food Security to national anti-hunger initiatives. Thus, as others have pointed out (Clapp 2014; Edelman 2014) and as mentioned above, there is considerable give-and-take and mutual influence between food security and food sovereignty as concepts. Both concepts are in motion, as Edelman (2014) reminds us, and their respective trajectories are largely influenced by the dynamic tension that exists between them. A binary approach to food security and food sovereignty, then, does not do justice to either concept or to the multifaceted relationship between them. A relational approach, on the other hand, helps us to appreciate the ways in which the two concepts are historically linked and not only coexist but coproduce each other.

Just as a relational lens is helpful for examining the ways in which food sovereignty is simultaneously shaping and being shaped by other related concepts, it can also be helpful for examining how food sovereignty itself is a composite of different concepts, paradigms and approaches, which interact dynamically, pushing its ongoing evolution. The various elements embedded within and comprising food sovereignty are perhaps best captured in the '6 pillars of food sovereignty' developed at the Nyéléni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty, in Selingue, Mali. Nyéléni was a defining moment in the evolution and articulation

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<sup>6</sup>According to Clapp (2014, 207),

The 1996 World Food Summit expanded the definition of food security, and with the addition of the word 'social' in 2001, remains the most widely used and authoritative definition of the concept today: 'Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (FAO, 2001). The Food and agriculture organization (FAO) now also frequently refers to four pillars of food security: availability, access, utilization, and stability, when explaining the concept (FAO, 2008).

The most widely recognized definition of food sovereignty, coming out of the Nyéléni Food Sovereignty Forum of 2007, is: 'the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems' (Nyéléni 2007a). This basic definition is excerpted from a longer, more detailed definition of food sovereignty contained in the Declaration of Nyéléni (Nyéléni 2007a).

of the concept by transnational social movements and their allies, and it was there that the most widely referenced definition of food sovereignty (see note 5) was developed, along with a broader framework that includes the following six main pillars (Nyéléni 2007b):

Food sovereignty ...

- i. focuses on food for people
- ii. values food providers
- iii. localizes food systems
- iv. puts control locally
- v. builds knowledge and skills
- vi. works with nature

While these pillars are not to be taken rigidly and certainly should not be mistaken for a checklist, they serve as helpful guideposts for analysis into the multiple dimensions of food sovereignty, as conceived of by transnational social movements. For the purposes of research into food sovereignty construction, they might be thought of as ‘arenas of interaction’, defined by Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou (2015, 56) as ‘sites and frameworks of interchanges, communication, bargaining, and negotiation’. Take, for example, the first pillar of food sovereignty, *focuses on food for people*, which affirms the right of all people to healthy, culturally appropriate food and that food be treated first and foremost as a life-sustaining resource and not simply as a commodity for profit (Nyéléni 2007b). This is an arena in which Venezuela has seen some notable advances, but also one riddled with tensions and contradictions. Through substantial government investment in food access and feeding programs, a national survey in 2013 found that over 96 percent of the population was regularly eating 3–4 meals a day, an extraordinary accomplishment, as recognized by the FAO (AVN 2013).<sup>7</sup> However, as a member of the GMO-Free Venezuela campaign put it, ‘This same food system that’s been applauded by the FAO has a horrific ecological footprint... and health consequences too’.<sup>8</sup> This comment touches upon a number of issues, including the type and quality of food and the processes involved from farm to plate. This, then, raises fundamental questions with regard to ‘food for people’ – *what* food and from *where*? And does it matter? On one end of the spectrum are those who might argue that what matters most is a readily available supply of cheap food that is universally accessible to the whole of the population. In this paradigm, the right to food might be equated with ‘the right to calories’ (Valente 2014, 156). On the other end of the spectrum is a more multidimensional paradigm of food as a nexus of nutrition, culture and ecology, and as a vehicle for broader transformation.

In Venezuela, both of these paradigms – characterized by McMichael (2009, 147) as ‘food from nowhere’ versus ‘food from somewhere’ – are at play. The former appears to be the paradigm underlying many of Venezuela’s government food programs, which continue to rely in large part upon food produced through the industrial food system, both imported and domestically sourced, in order to make affordable food available to Venezuela’s largely urban population. The latter is what is being advocated among many of Venezuela’s social movements, together with some from within the government, who are

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<sup>7</sup>This percentage has likely gone down in the face of recent food shortages, although conclusive data is not yet available at the time of writing (see Schiavoni and Camacaro 2016).

<sup>8</sup>Interview, 21 July 2015.

working toward a more transformative approach to food, as a means of reclaiming Venezuela's agricultural and culinary traditions, enhancing public health, building bridges across the urban-rural divide, and challenging corporate control of the food supply. This second approach involves a critique of the former. For instance, some point out that the industrially processed foods pervasive in the Venezuelan diet have been implicated in fueling Venezuela's mounting public health concerns, with a third of the population overweight or obese (Briceño-Iragorry, Gabriela, and Alexandra 2012). As one government representative involved in food sovereignty efforts reflected, 'The food we're importing is not healthy, unfortunately'.<sup>9</sup>

The institutional design of Venezuela's food programs around cheap, industrially processed foods has also come under fire by food sovereignty activists for perpetuating the commodification of food. They point to the growing business of buying subsidized food and reselling it on the domestic black market and/or smuggling subsidized food across the Colombian border, where it can be resold at much higher prices. Such practices, which the government has been struggling to curb, are implicated in contributing to the shortages, while also further fueled by them (Mills and Camacaro 2015). The GMO-Free Venezuela representative adds that a distinction must be made that Venezuela is far from experiencing an overall food shortage, but is in fact experiencing shortages of particular processed food items: 'One thing I'll tell you is that people aren't lining up for yucca'. The same foods that people are lining up for, she explains – for example, pre-cooked corn flour, margarine, mayonnaise and refined sugar – are foods produced through the industrial food system that are in fact bad for the environment, bad for human health and against the interests of food sovereignty. Some activists are therefore calling for a wholesale shift away from industrial foods as they promote alternatives. And yet the same actors who are calling for a paradigm shift around food and food provisioning also support, in principle, the government's efforts to make food universally accessible as a basic human right through a host of feeding and food access programs. The demand is not to do away with these programs, but to move away from the dependency on industrially processed 'food from nowhere' upon which they are currently based. In a scenario that largely mirrors the above-mentioned interplay between food security and food sovereignty, there is the question of how to ensure that people eat sufficiently *and* to do so in a way that addresses issues such as public health, sustainability and autonomy. This would likely involve not displacing one paradigm with another, but identifying the points of synergy between the two.

Through this brief discussion of the first pillar of food sovereignty as an 'arena of interaction', we can see the ways in which a wide range of competing paradigms and approaches are interacting dynamically to shape food sovereignty construction. We can also appreciate the ways in which food sovereignty construction is a composite of many different processes. Understanding such processes, and the elements constituting them, is key to moving 'from static to dynamic analysis' (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), as part of a relational lens to food sovereignty construction. This will also be picked up in the next section on an interactive lens. A key point here is that a relational lens helps us to be critical about the categories of analysis used in food sovereignty studies (and beyond), reflecting on how the meanings of certain analytical categories change as history marches forward. Finally, a relational lens, as Hart (2006, 21–2) acknowledges:

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<sup>9</sup>Interview, 22 July 2015.

differs fundamentally from one that deploys ideal types, or that posits different ‘cases’ as local variants of a more general phenomenon. Instead of comparing pre-existing objects, events, places, or identities, the focus is on how they are constituted in relation to one another through power-laden practices in the multiple, interconnected arenas of everyday life. Clarifying these connections and mutual processes of constitution – as well as slippages, openings, and contradictions – helps to generate new understandings of the possibilities for social change.

### **State-society relations in food sovereignty construction: an interactive approach**

The third and final tendency in the recent food sovereignty literature addressed here is not – or not sufficiently – disaggregating the actors involved in food sovereignty construction and examining the interactions among them. This has to do with the positioning of the state vis-à-vis society in food sovereignty studies. Until recently, the more dominant view in the literature had been a society-centric view that emphasized the role of non-state actors in pushing for food sovereignty, without addressing the strategic role of the state in facilitating efforts toward food sovereignty beyond localized, scattered initiatives, however concrete, inspiring and fascinating these are. If food sovereignty is to mean a wholesale transformation of the food system, benefitting social classes and groups beyond the organized ranks of social movements, then the role of the state becomes key. As scholars have increasingly begun to pursue the involvement of the state in food sovereignty construction, however, much of this emerging literature has tended toward being state-centric. There is a tendency of assigning too great a role to the state in determining whether food sovereignty construction will push forward or not, and if so, to what extent, and with what character and trajectory. This tendency has at least two problematic implications. First is that the role of non-state actors is not significant enough to bring more prominently into the analysis. Second is that non-state actors can be lumped together with the state as a single actor just because they fall under the same broad political project – e.g., lumping the social movements who identify with the Bolivarian Revolution together with the Venezuelan state. The latter is to conflate ‘state-society interaction’ with ‘state action’.

The limitations of a state-centered approach can be seen in the analysis of sustainable agriculture in Venezuela. This is a particularly paradoxical area within Venezuelan food sovereignty efforts, as sustainable agriculture is explicitly promoted by law, whereas its actual promotion and implementation by state agencies is much more uneven. As documented by Enríquez (2013) and Enríquez and Newman (2016), while the state has invested heavily in agriculture in recent years, the credit, technical support and inputs provided to producers are simultaneously supporting both industrial agriculture and agroecological practices, partly depending upon the agencies involved, which are sometimes in direct conflict on the matter. One example is the simultaneous promotion and distribution of synthetic and biological fertilizers and pesticides, which are associated with significantly divergent models of production. Furthermore, Enríquez (2013) and Enríquez and Newman (2016) have found that these conflicting forms of support remain skewed more toward industrial agriculture than agroecology. From such accounts alone, one could conclude that the state commands the course of food sovereignty initiatives, privileging industrial agriculture over agroecology. However, what these and other accounts do not include are the significant openings created through the Bolivarian Revolution for movements for sustainable agriculture and agroecology coming from below. That is, there are movements that had been working on these issues long before 1999, that, though they might have a critical stance on certain state policies, feel that their work has been able to advance in significant ways with greater institutional support/collaboration from the state through the Bolivarian

Revolution (Paget-Clarke 2004; Nuñez 2007). These movements, in turn, are influencing state policies and actions, in dialectical relationship with state actors.

Venezuela's broad movement for sustainable agriculture and agroecology – comprised of a range of both formal and informal local and national organizations and institutions – is relatively autonomous from the state Bolivarian government, even when individually and collectively those within this movement consider themselves part of the Bolivarian Revolution. These are among the most vocal critics of state support for industrial agriculture, which they see as being contrary to the interests of food sovereignty. One point of critique, for example, is the nationalization of the country's largest agricultural input chain, AgroIsleña in 2010, which the state continues to run under the name AgroPatria, but, which according to an agroecology activist, 'is no more than a *chavista* AgroIsleña' (Schiavoni 2014, 21). The same activist added that such practices undermine the more innovative efforts supported by the state, such as financing for farmer-led research projects that build upon locally held knowledge (Schiavoni 2014, 21). The state-centric emphasis in the scholarly literature has resulted in scant studies that have examined the ways in which such movements have grown in number and in political power, serving as an important counterforce to the entrenched power structures upholding industrial agriculture.

In situations where there are competing currents within the state, either between or within ideological camps, resulting partly in policy initiatives that run counter to food sovereignty principles, relatively autonomous social movements can be a radicalizing force from below that can directly frustrate conservative political swings. This could be seen in a recent three-year struggle over the country's national seed law. In 2013, as the Venezuelan National Assembly was about to pass a new seed law that would have paved the way for the legalization of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in the country, social movements came together from across the urban-rural divide under the banner of 'Venezuela Libre De Transgénicos' ('GMO-Free Venezuela') and succeeded in grinding the process to a halt. They then launched a participatory, bottom-up national process to develop an alternative seed law through popular consultation (see Mills and Camacaro 2013 and Camacaro, Mills, and Schiavoni 2016 for detailed accounts). The result two years into the process was a proposed seed law that was radically different from that which had been nearly passed two years prior. The new proposed law garnered major support among civil society, and among a growing number of state actors as well, ultimately resulting in its passage in December 2015 by the outgoing *chavista*-majority National Assembly, after intense deliberation and debate (Camacaro, Mills, and Schiavoni 2016). Components of the law include a ban on both domestic production and importation of transgenic seeds; restrictions against patenting of plant genetic material; and special protections for locally produced seeds of Venezuela's Indigenous, Afro-descendant and peasant farming communities.

The struggle over the seed law demonstrates that the efforts of GMO-Free Venezuela are no less influential in shaping state policies than any number of state institutions involved in food sovereignty matters. Furthermore, this society-driven campaign at once worked both through and outside of the mechanisms of the state, and in collaboration with certain state actors and in antagonism with others. Such important dynamics are all but invisibilized with a state-centered lens. Similarly, were they to be analyzed through a society-centered lens, the important openings from within the state for the advancement of this radical grassroots policy agenda could just as easily be overlooked.

That social movements for agroecology, against GMOs and for a progressive seed law have significantly influenced state action and state-society interaction – and thus, national policy dynamics – pinpoints the importance of not missing the role of social forces from below in one's analysis, as well as of not lumping social movement actors with the state

even when they are in the same political project. It also encourages us not to conflate state action with state-society interaction. To limit one's lens to the role of the state, then, is to miss important pieces of the picture. As emphasized by Migdal (1994, 2), 'there is no getting around the mutuality of state-society interactions: Societies affect states as much as, or possibly more than, states affect societies'.

This is where an interactive lens becomes an important framework of analysis for gaining an understanding of how state and societal forces are mutually shaping each other (Fox 1993; Gaventa and McGee 2010). Indeed, analyzing food sovereignty construction through such a lens is important for understanding how political power is distributed, contested and transformed in and in relation to the food system, and how the food system in turn shapes broader societal processes, such as capital accumulation, as well as state formation, and vice versa. Given the discussion above, and following Kohli and Vivienne (1994, 294), there are three related fundamental assumptions that are important here – namely, that it is critical to disaggregate the state; that the boundaries between the state and society are generally blurred; and that it is more useful to think of a recursive interaction between state and society that is the mutually transforming nature of state-society relations. Relevant here is Fox's 'interactive approach' to state-society relations which he developed to study Mexico's public food distribution system in the 1980s. The approach 'builds on the strength of both society- and state-centered approaches, while attempting to compensate for their limitations' (Fox 1993, 21–22). Fox argues that 'state action is the result of a reciprocal cause and effect relationship between changes in the balance of power within the state and the shifts in the balance of power within society. Through conflict, each is transformed' (Fox 1993, 22). In attempting to assess the factors contributing to the unexpected relatively successful outcomes of a state-supported food program, Fox found that neither state-centered nor society-centered approaches could adequately explain the dynamics at play. Instead, the outcomes could best be explained through focusing on the 'interaction between state and society, the institutions that mediate such interaction, and the factors that account for how those institutions are in turn transformed' (Fox 1993, 39). Employing such an approach, Fox argued that certain openings from above facilitated by reformist actors within the state were met with mobilization by societal actors from below that 'shifted the boundaries of what was politically possible' (Fox 1993, 39), yielding unexpected outcomes that empowered rural communities.

This study adopts Fox's (1993, 11–12) definition of the state, namely, 'compris(ing) the ensemble of political, social, economic, and coercive institutions that exercise "public" authority in a given territory'. Such a take ascribes neither to a purely Weberian view of the state as autonomous from societal forces nor to a purely Marxist view of the state an instrument of class power, instead seeing state and social forces as mutually shaping one another. Furthermore, the state is seen not as a monolithic entity that acts in a unified way all the time, but as a heterogeneous and contested space. Two key categories of actors here are 'social actors' or 'societal actors', defined as 'groups of people who identify common interests and share ideas about how to pursue them' (Fox 1993, 23), and 'state actors', defined as 'groups of officials whose actions push or pull in the same political direction' (Fox 1993, 29).

The challenges and opportunities perceived by different state and societal actors put them together, tactically or strategically, in relation to a particular reform or political project for system-wide change. While unified state actors' ranks can lead to state action toward desirable reforms, splits among the various factions of state actors can also facilitate the emergence of favorable changes in the 'political opportunity structure' that can then enhance the autonomy and capacity of claim-makers from below to demand claims and

rights, and/or forge and expand alliances with some groups within the state (Tarrow 1998). Bridging objectively or subjectively allied state and societal actors are what Fox calls ‘institutional access routes’ (Fox 1993, 31). In the case of Venezuela these include formal and informal institutional channels through which similarly oriented state and societal actors get in touch with, negotiate with, support or pressure each other, and/or plan together on how to bring them closer to their common goals. Sharing the same vision of the Bolivarian Revolution, or a shared disdain for traditional bourgeois classes, or being jointly located in a particular food policy or agroecology initiative are examples of such access routes. In Fox’s analysis, institutions are seen as playing a key role in mediating the relations between state and societal actors, and thus serve as focal sites of his analysis, very much in consonance with the historical institutionalism take of Thelen and Steinmo (1992) described above. In particular, Fox (1993, 217) emphasizes the creation of community food councils in rural Mexico in providing

a new, two-way institutional access route that connected state and societal actors. From above, state reformists structured new patterns of representation within rural society. From below, these new opportunities for participation became autonomous channels for interest articulation that in turn left their imprint on the state.

As I have elaborated elsewhere (Schiavoni 2015), the community food councils described by Fox share certain parallels with citizen-led bodies in Venezuela that are increasingly taking up matters of food and agriculture.<sup>10</sup> The building blocks of such efforts are communal councils, local citizen-run bodies that set their own priorities and budgets, interface with the government and channel state resources into community development projects. Supported by the Communal Council Law of 2006, there are upwards of 44,900 communal councils throughout the country as of the time of writing.<sup>11</sup> A major thrust of the Bolivarian Revolution in recent years, coming both from above and below, is a push for the formation of *comunas* by the linking together of communal councils across a shared territory. The stated goal behind the construction of *comunas* is to facilitate a greater transfer of power from the state to citizens, toward the furthering of ‘participatory democracy’, in which citizens play a more direct role in governance. As of May 2016, there were over 1500 *comunas* officially registered with the government, with additional ones under construction (MPPCMS 2016). Occupying a key space at the intersection of state and society, the organized citizens who comprise the *comunas* have emerged as important new actors in food sovereignty efforts. Many of them are taking food sovereignty matters into their own hands in a distinct departure from the approaches of various state agencies, while continuing to interact with these agencies, mutually influencing each other in the process (Schiavoni 2015).

Leach and Scoones (2007, 7) remind us, however, that ‘it is evident that many instances of citizen engagement take place outside these institutionally-orchestrated spaces through more spontaneous forms of mobilization’. This resonates with the Venezuelan context, in which community councils and *comunas* serve as only part, albeit an important part, of a much broader patchwork of citizen-led efforts in Venezuela that is shaping the construction of food sovereignty in dynamic and contentious ways. Other critical pieces of this patchwork are the many social movements involved in food sovereignty activism in Venezuela,

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<sup>10</sup>For a background on the construction of *comunas* in Venezuela, some of the top-level internal discussions about this, and an effort to locate it more broadly in the literature, see Foster (2015).

<sup>11</sup>Personal communication, Raul Key of Fundacomunal, Caracas, 23 July 2015.



which, as mentioned above, played a decisive role in getting food sovereignty onto the state's agenda in the first place, through years of prior mobilization. These movements are themselves quite heterogeneous and operate with varying degrees of closeness to, or distance from, the state, while still influencing the state's engagement in food sovereignty construction in important ways. Some of these movements intersect significantly with the *comunas*, while others do not. Some of them are largely aligned with state policies, while others are largely critical of them, even if they continue to identify with the broader vision of the Bolivarian Revolution.

Given the nuanced and diverse positioning of societal actors, including social movements, vis-à-vis the state, and their mix of 'inside' and 'outside' strategies, it is suggested here that some additional analytical tools are needed to complement those presented thus far, for a deeper understanding of how these movements function and what their roles are in food sovereignty construction, particularly in relation to the state. A number of scholars have already made some helpful analytical bridges between the sort of state-society frameworks presented thus far and the frameworks coming out of social movement theory. Leach and Scoones (2007, 15), for instance, suggest an 'integrated perspective on mobilization' that

in turn suggests a more integrated perspective on citizenship: one that understands socially and spatially located nature of the 'mobilising citizen', engaged in a dynamic, networked political interactions, drawing on a variety of resources, becoming part of shifting forms of social solidarity and identification.

Gaventa and McGee (2010, 11) argue, with respect to state-society relations and social movement theory, that:

there is a need to bring these two approaches together: it is precisely by looking at how and under what conditions policy-focused collective action and social movements emerge that we can also gain insights into when and how organized citizen action can bring about national policy change as well.

Gaventa and McGee (2010, 26) provide a helpful framework for such an integrated analysis, drawing from classic social movement theorists such as Tarrow, Tilly and McAdam, looking, for example, at the ways in which political openings are both created and seized by social movements, at mobilizing structures, and at the framing of claims as 'an intrinsically contentious and dynamic process'. Such analytical tools are helpful for further interrogating the role of social movements vis-à-vis state-society relations in the construction of food sovereignty.

Going back to the state, state actors then become the other critical set of players in an interactive perspective to state-society relations. The emergence of a 'state-society synergy' or 'mutually reinforcing interaction' (Evans 1997; Fox 1993; Migdal, Kohli, and Shue 1994), however, does not guarantee that the desired system change or reforms, such as food sovereignty, can be pushed or constructed to a great extent or intended character, pace and direction. This is because such political interaction occurs in the context of the limits imposed, or possibilities allowed, by pre-existing social structures and relevant institutions. This is even more so and even more complicated in settings where remnants of an old regime continue to be entrenched in the midst of emerging enclaves of a new regime, as with the Bolivarian Revolution (see, e.g., Enríquez 2013).

Furthermore, state actors, and by implication, the societal actors they are allied to, face the difficult challenge of the double imperative of facilitating capital accumulation on the

one hand and maintaining a historically determined minimum level of political legitimacy on the other hand (O'Connor 1973). In largely capitalist-oriented societies, the state will always be dependent on how and how well capital accumulation proceeds because it is partly or largely dependent on the revenues generated by such processes. This is even more so in settings where the state has nationalized key industries, and in the context of the left-turn national governments, the strategy around neoextractivism (Arsel et al. 2014; Petras and Veltmeyer 2014). Capital accumulation is, and must, always be paired with legitimation – which Fox (1993, 30–31) defines as ‘the creation and renewal of the conditions for social peace – that is, the containment of most conflict within “proper channels”’. He further explains that legitimacy ‘refers to a political system’s renewable lease on power, which depends on its appearing to function better than plausible alternatives ...’ (Fox 1993, 31).

State actors’ location at the various levels of the state may also contribute to their accessibility (or vulnerability) vis-à-vis claim-makers from below. Migdal’s categories are useful in this sense where he explains that four levels are important to note: the trenches, the dispersed field offices, the agency’s central office, and the commanding heights (executive leadership) (Migdal 1994, 16). In the context of political transformation within which social movements in Latin America operate, specifically from struggles against clientelism and *caciquismo* to struggles for rights, Harvey (1998, 8–9) explains that, ‘When movements no longer petition the government for favors but demand respect for rights, the practices inevitably change, even if the authorities attempt to reassert vertical lines of clientilistic control’. Following Foweraker’s work on Mexico, Harvey (1998, 23) also notes that,

The hallmark of Mexican popular movements is not their radical autonomy from the political system, but their institutionalism ... This trend does not mean that movements only seek incorporation into the existing rules. Foweraker saw them, instead, as institutionalist and non-conformist. They negotiate in order to get demands met, but they also mobilize and challenge the way they are treated by state authorities. (Harvey 1998, 23)

This is an important conceptual angle for food sovereignty research, particularly in Venezuela and other Latin American countries that have similar political histories.

### **Toward a historical, relational and interactive approach to food sovereignty research**

This contribution has pointed to several proposed directions forward for the rapidly growing field of food sovereignty research, brought together under the historical-relational-interactive, or HRI, framework. As the concept of food sovereignty and the movements connected to it are in a dynamic state of evolution, so too is our understanding of them. A key question becomes how to study such a moving target. Perhaps most fundamentally, it is important to have clarity as to what we are studying. If we set out in search of food sovereignty in a given context, we are bound not to find it. Furthermore, we risk overlooking the struggles and initiatives underway that are providing the very fabric out of which food sovereignty is being, or might be, constructed.

This could not be better exemplified than in the case of Venezuela. What can be seen in the country at the time of this writing – shortages of basic items, high inflation and an especially tense political climate – might look as far away from food sovereignty as imaginable. And yet, this moment of crisis is providing fertile ground for seeds of deeper transformation toward food sovereignty, as unprecedented numbers of Venezuelans are growing their own food, saving and exchanging seeds, bartering with their neighbors,

and seeking out alternatives in order to feed themselves and their families (Schiavoni and Camacaro 2016). Social movements are seizing the moment to push for a radicalization of national food sovereignty efforts, including advancing proposals that had been long in the making before the current crisis. One such proposal is the above-mentioned new seed law, which is now undergoing a process of *comunalización*, or grassroots diffusion, as movements seek to push forward its implementation as rapidly as possible in the face of industry-backed opposition. Simultaneously, movements are working to forge concrete solutions to confront the current bottleneck in food distribution. An example is the Feria Conuquera, a highly popular monthly market in Caracas featuring homemade and artisanal alternatives to the items missing from supermarket shelves. Another example born out of the crisis is Plan Pueblo a Pueblo, a people-to-people effort to forge direct links between rural and urban communities, through the vehicle of the *comunas*. In little over a year since its inception, Plan Pueblo a Pueblo is now reaching upwards of 40,000 urban inhabitants with affordable fresh food, with other communities looking to get involved. The government has also launched a series of new initiatives, from a new Ministry of Urban Agriculture to promote and consolidate urban food production to an emergency door-to-door grocery delivery effort in partnership with community organizations. Some of the government responses are being embraced by food sovereignty activists (albeit to differing degrees), while others have come under criticism as perpetuating a broken system, generating much debate and discussion over what food sovereignty means and looks like and how to get there.

How can academics, as well as activists and policymakers, make sense of these recent developments? Here HRI can help bring us to a deeper understanding of the current conjuncture and future possibilities. A historical lens sheds light into how Venezuela's food system got into the precarious place that it is and how food politics connect to the broader politics of the country. A relational lens can help us to tease out and analyze the many responses to the present crisis, from those serving to reinforce the current system to those representing a radical break from it, and to identify where the greatest points of synergy and tension – and possibilities for convergence – may lie. An interactive lens can help us to appreciate the interdependency between state and societal actors required for any meaningful shift out of the current system. As one grassroots food sovereignty activist wrote reflecting upon the present challenges, 'This has shown us the urgent task of deepening and radicalizing this process in our own hands and not leaving the fate of this country in the hands of bureaucrats'.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, she and others are calling upon the state to fulfill its obligations in the implementation of the new seed law, as an urgent step forward toward food sovereignty, among other demands upon the state. They are under no illusion that they can go it alone. Furthermore, an HRI perspective can help us to see the current conjuncture facing Venezuela for what it is – the current conjuncture. How Venezuela's food politics will further unfold is anyone's guess. But here too an h-r-i approach can be helpful for analysis of the possibilities and limits of food sovereignty construction in Venezuela and for considering under what conditions the current crisis could serve as a catalyst for a deepening of food sovereignty efforts. Might there be a radicalization of the interaction between pro-reform state actors and social mobilizations from below in such a way as to impact on the overall balance of forces within the state and in society in favor of a deepened food sovereignty agenda representing a significant break from the current system?

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<sup>12</sup>Personal communication via email, 7 December 2015.

The current crisis facing Venezuela's food politics brings us to an immediate subcontext, which is a tumultuous moment facing Latin America's 'pink tide' countries, of which Venezuela has been an important reference point. As many of the pink tide governments are also among the first to have adopted national food sovereignty policies, the implications for food sovereignty construction in this moment of shifting political dynamics are significant. Here an HRI perspective may be helpful for looking at some of these other national contexts (both in other countries where food sovereignty is officially on the agenda and in those where it is not) as well as regional food sovereignty construction efforts such as those of the 11-member ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) founded by Venezuela and Cuba. On the flip side, while Venezuela has served as an apt and timely example to illustrate an HRI approach to food sovereignty research, the relevance of HRI spans well beyond this particular national case and beyond Latin America to other contexts. In many ways, the current situation seen in Venezuela, particularly the apparent failures of its deeply entrenched food import and distribution complex to meet the needs of the population, serves as a microcosm of the broader global food system, as exemplified in the food price crisis of 2007–2008 and onward. Since then, there has been a flurry of new proposals on the global front, from those serving to uphold and strengthen current global food and agriculture architecture, to those pushing for radically different approaches, including a centering of human rights. What are the competing paradigms and approaches underlying these proposals, where did they come from, and how are different actors positioned in relation to them, and in relation to each other? Similar questions might be asked in any national, or even subnational, context in the wake of the food price crisis, and the ongoing structural failures of the dominant global food system.

It is hoped that scholars elsewhere will take up an HRI approach and apply it to their respective contexts, in the process further refining it and developing other complementary tools and frameworks. Especially as food sovereignty movements continue to expand into new contexts, there is infinite room for further research. For example, how can a historical approach be employed to challenge dominant origin stories of food sovereignty efforts in a given context that may omit important pieces of history and key elements and actors? While Edelman (2014) has done important work on this from a global perspective, relatively little has been done in national and subnational contexts (with important exceptions, such as Godek 2015). Furthermore, how can comparative historical methods most effectively be brought to bear in attempts to historicize food sovereignty? The work of Philip McMichael, particularly his incorporated comparison approach (McMichael 1990) may be instructive here.<sup>13</sup> With regards to a relational approach, once we have a deeper understanding of the competing paradigms and approaches shaping food sovereignty construction in a given context, what tools can help us identify points of synergy and tension, and thus potential for convergence? Here the work of Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011), in their assessment of the political tendencies of food movements, provides a helpful entry point. So too do recent studies of convergence among movements, including those by Brent, Schiavoni, and Fradejas (2015) and Tramel (2016) in the US and global contexts, respectively. For an interactive approach, further tools are needed for more intricately situating the role of capital in state-society relations, and here McKay (forthcoming) offers a helpful framework in his 'state-society-capital nexus'. Connected to this is the need for deeper analyses of class as related to the diverse actors involved in food sovereignty efforts. Important recent work

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<sup>13</sup>See also McMichael's (2014) 'Historicizing food sovereignty' for additional helpful insights into historicization.

in this area has been done by Henderson (2016), in his class analysis of food sovereignty movements in Ecuador and Mexico, along with earlier work such as that of Borras, Edelman, and Kay (2008) on the class dynamics of transnational agrarian movements.

These are some suggested starting points for future research, but the list is endless. If this piece were to be boiled down into a single message it would be that the dynamism of our research must strive to match pace with the dynamism of food sovereignty efforts themselves. In Venezuela as with elsewhere, nothing is predetermined in the attempted construction of food sovereignty. Unexpected outcomes are par for the course. For researchers of food sovereignty, this is perhaps the greatest challenge – and the greatest thrill – of the work at hand.

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