

## **Ecology, Community, and Food *Sovereignty*: What's in a Word?**

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### **Abstract**

'Food sovereignty' plays an increasingly important political role as a focus for grass-roots agri-food organizations, such as La Via Campesina, in their attempts to contest the social injustices, health impacts, and ecological damage resulting from the increasing global dominance of corporate / industrial agriculture. While not seeking to detract from the successes of such movements, there remain ethical, political, and ecological concerns about just how the 'sovereignty' in food sovereignty is to be interpreted and what, if any, its relation to previous histories, definitions, and applications of *political sovereignty* might be. Sovereignty's role, for example, in settler colonialism and environmental destruction, are rarely addressed in the food sovereignty literature with advocates focusing instead on its definitional malleability and contemporary political utility. However, critical appropriations of Schmitt's infamous definition of sovereignty help specify its colonial, anti-political, and anti-ecological *modus operandi* and makes clear certain dangers inherent in uncritically adopting the term.

## Introduction

The term ‘food sovereignty’ has gained considerable traction among agri-food movements, academics, and policy-makers. The movement is a grass-roots response to the global food crisis and aims to provide an alternative to the dominant food regime—that focuses on short-term efficiency and product commodification (Rosset 2003; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2014). Food sovereignty movements seek to reframe the discourse and reality around food production in terms that engender more appropriate and acceptable conditions for farmers, peasants, women, communities, and Indigenous groups. Rather than the current reliance on large-scale monocultures where products are intended for distant global markets food sovereignty is cultivated through sustainable, local, and ecologically friendly production methods (La Via Campesina 1996). This movement supports ecological and crop diversity, traditional foodways (Desmarais and Wittman 2014; Jarosz 2014), and seeks to reframe talk of a ‘food crisis’ according to the interests of the ‘oppressed’ rather than the ‘powerful’ (Fairbairn 2010:16).

Although the movement has received accolades from activists and academics, some have recognized ambiguities and contradictions embedded in the Food Sovereignty framework (Agarwal, 2014; Hopma and Woods 2014; Hospes 2014). Such critiques have focused on: the challenges of localism and defining the local (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2015; Hinrichs 2000; Robbins 2015); the role of international trade (Burnett and Murphy 2014), the semantic confusion of the term ‘sovereign’ (Boyer 2010; Conversi 2016); the apparent contradictions in placing anti-state rhetoric alongside a discourse supporting a state and/or an internationally guaranteed ‘right to have rights’ (Patel 2009: 667)<sup>1</sup>; the “tension between individual and

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<sup>1</sup> Patel (2009) argues that food sovereignty should be “a right to shape food policy ... food sovereignty demands that such rights be respected, protected, and fulfilled” (667).

collective rights” (Agarwal 2014: 1259); the lack of translatability of policies derived in one socio-historical context to other parts of the world (Bernstein 2013) and; the conceptualization of the ‘peasant’ as a source of politically radical oppositional politics to capitalism (Bernstein 2013).<sup>2</sup> For Edelman (2014) such tensions and ambiguities denote the ways in which food sovereignty has become something of “a free-floating signifier filled with varying kinds of content” (959).

Clearly these ambiguities and contradictions do not necessarily threaten to disrupt the success of the movement, but may signify its adaptability to differing historical/cultural, political, and economic contexts and its ability to respond reflexively to different requirements (Bové and Dufour 2001). They do, however, perhaps signify a worrying absence of critical thought concerning the concept of ‘sovereignty’ being employed and this, we claim, may have important political and ecological consequences. It is particularly striking that the fundamental and widely cited critiques of sovereignty as a key legal-political concept by theorists including Benjamin, Agamben, and Derrida has been entirely absent from the literature about food sovereignty. We hope to generate a conversation across these discourses by i) unpacking the ‘sovereignty’ in food sovereignty; ii) outlining the political and ecological risks of employing ‘sovereignty’ according to its critics and; iii), exploring possible consequences that a lack of attention to such a fundamental question as *who* is sovereign over *what* and in what context, might have in issues around food sovereignty, especially where indigenous communities and ecological issues are

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<sup>2</sup> The Bernstein-McMichael debate: Bernstein (2013) is skeptical about ‘peasant’ food production’s capacity to feed the world population and is concerned about the conceptualization of the peasant (1041). Returning to a ‘peasant way’ may not be possible or preferable due to the types of social inequalities in some of these communities (Bernstein 2013:1046). Food sovereignty discourse undertheorizes how to deal with these issues. McMichael (2015) recognizes Bernstein’s concerns, but ultimately concludes that food sovereignty’s merits extend beyond its definitional capacity of peasants. In an attempt to reconcile the debate, Jansen (2015) demonstrates where these arguments overlap and argues both arguments warrant consideration.

concerned. To the extent that ‘sovereignty’ implies (as it traditionally does) an ultimate decisionistic power over something or someone, leaving it undertheorized risks unintended social and ecological consequences.

### **The ‘Sovereignty’ in Food Sovereignty**

To reiterate our concerns over the ‘sovereignty’ in food sovereignty is not intended as a critique of the practical politics, diversity, and aspirations of the food sovereignty movement per se.

Rather we seek to address both a ‘narrower’ question and a broader context concerning food sovereignty, both of which seem to have garnered relatively little attention in the literature.

The narrow focus concerns the political and ecological dangers inscribed within the very term ‘sovereignty’, its history, definitions, and applications. Sovereignty is, after all, a key term, if not *the* key term in the lexicon of modern Western politics. It is intimately linked to claims concerning territories *and* territorial expansion; religious (especially monotheistic and absolute) authority; the authority of the post-Westphalian nation state; the ‘indivisible’ concentration of powers ascribed, for example, by Hobbes’ political philosophy and also found in Bodin’s famous definition of sovereignty as “the absolute and perpetual power of a commonwealth”; (Bodin, 2008: 1)<sup>3</sup> the accrual of a claim to the sole ‘legitimate’ use of violence; the prescribed constitutional powers of a people, parliament, or head of state *and*, very importantly, the capacity to declare states of emergency (exceptions) that exceed and suspend those same constitutional powers (Schmitt, 2005; Agamben, 2005).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bodin, Jean (2008) *On Sovereignty* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Schmitt, Carl (2005) *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Agamben, Giorgio (2005) *State of Exception* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Given the continuing history of so many politically dubious associations it seems surprising that an alternative, and politically radical, social movement seems to have adopted this term so readily. We should note, by point of contrast, that many indigenous communities, including those in Canada, have been involved in longstanding and extensive debates about the term sovereignty and its (in)ability to capture traditional cultural practices and understandings of self-governance and interdependence (Alfred 2009; Grey and Patel 2015). Alfred (2009) argues that adopting this Western rhetoric undermines cultural diversity and Indigenous autonomy. Other groups, such as Honduran peasants, have also been reluctant to identify with food sovereignty which could be because of the terms historical and political baggage (Boyer, 2010).<sup>5</sup>

So our narrow focus asks whether food sovereignty is really about ‘sovereignty’ in terms of any of these more traditional senses? If so how?

This is necessary because, as Conversi (2016: 2) states

“the link between sovereignty and food sovereignty has scarcely been theorized across human and social science disciplines”

Edelman too notes:

“Food sovereignty proponents have been remarkably vague about who or what is ‘the sovereign’ in ‘food sovereignty’ ... The nature of ‘sovereignty’ itself ... is rarely scrutinised in the food sovereignty literature or by food sovereignty movements, most of

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<sup>5</sup> Boyer, J. (2010) Food Security, Food Sovereignty, and Local Challenges for Transnational Agrarian Movements: The Honduras Case. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 37(2), 319–351.

which find themselves in adversarial relationships with the states in which they operate (Edelman, 2014: 974).<sup>6</sup>

Edelman's own concerns are primarily practical and focus upon how the terms multiple connotations makes it difficult to implement: "the almost wilful neglect of some key theoretical and policy issues impedes further progress... we need to devote considerably more attention to some of the challenges and paradoxes" (Edelman 2014: 974). It is surely worth raising deeper philosophical and political questions about whether a radical and progressive political movement should really be associating itself with a claim to 'sovereignty' at all? Such questions might include: What does sovereignty actually mean? Who or what is sovereign? How is sovereignty 'constituted'? What are its boundaries and its effects, and perhaps most importantly who and/or what is (made) *subject* to the operation of sovereignty? *For sovereignty is always sovereignty over someone and/or something.*

This last question links our narrow focus on the meaning of sovereignty to much broader concerns in terms of a specific critique of ecological aspects of sovereignty (XXXX 2011).<sup>7</sup> For the unspoken, and usually unquestioned, assumption underlying all claims to sovereignty *and* even most political critiques of sovereignty, is that the territories and bodies subjected to sovereign authority would 'naturally' include much more than just *human* politics and beings, for example, rivers, forests, mountains, wildlife, plants, and so on. There is, however, as radical ecologists and many Indigenous Peoples might point out, nothing 'natural' at all about an assumption that the more-than-just-human world is placed at certain human beings' disposal,

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<sup>6</sup> Edelman, M. (2014) 'Food Sovereignty: Forgotten Genealogies and Future Regulatory Challenges. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 41(6) pp.959–978.

<sup>7</sup> XXXX (2011)

subject to humanity's sovereign powers, that the world is only there as a resource to *feed* specifically human interests.

We should note that historically, claims to political sovereignty and ecological sovereignty have often been inseparable. Thom Kuehls, (1996)<sup>8</sup> for instance, has studied this pervasive aspect of ecological sovereignty as exemplified in the Brazilian state's declaration that "the Amazon is ours." Such claims, of course, have had profound (and devastating) repercussions for the Amazon's indigenous inhabitants, made subject to a sovereignty they do not recognize but which nonetheless supersedes any traditional claims they might have to political/geographic 'autonomy' and 'self-determination' (both themselves, we should note, terms that are far from being politically / culturally neutral).

Such situations are consequent upon previous colonial employments of sovereignty to distinguish between supposedly 'civilized nations' and those 'uncivilized peoples' placed under their tutelage. This was enshrined in those (legally positivist) notions of international law that emerged in the nineteenth century, notions that regarded the post-Westphalian nation state as both foundational and sovereign. From this perspective

“colonial confrontation was not a confrontation between two sovereign states, but between a sovereign European state and a non-European state that, according to the positivist jurisprudence of the time, was lacking in sovereignty” (Anghie, 1999: 3).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kuehls, Thom (1996) *Beyond Sovereign Territory: The Space of Ecopolitics* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>9</sup> Anghie, Antony (1999) 'Finding the Peripheries: Sovereignty and Colonialism in Nineteenth-Century International Law' *Harvard International Law Journal* 40 (1) pp.1-80.

The question that arises, though, is not just one of whether the indigenous peoples of the Amazon and elsewhere *should* have been (or now be) recognized as sovereign nations, (a key point of debate within many Indigenous communities) but also whether sovereignty is itself a term intimately bound up with defining peoples as either constituting or not constituting politically recognizable ‘nations’.<sup>10</sup> That is to say, the decision about such inclusions / exclusions might itself actually be regarded as exemplifying a key mode of operation of that form of sovereignty which developed in tandem with colonialism. From Anghie’s position, for example, sovereignty’s decisionistic role in declaring peoples to be either civilized or uncivilized was crucial. Indeed, he argues:

“Colonialism cannot be accounted for as an example of the application of sovereignty; rather, sovereignty was constituted and shaped through colonialism” (Anghie 1999: 6).

Sovereignty’s colonial employment to politically and ecologically dispossess indigenous peoples was not a marginal case of its misapplication, but, rather, constituted what we might term a colonial extension and evolving mode of its *raison d’être*.

Here, though, we also need, as Kuehl argued, to explicitly recognize sovereignty’s anti-ecological role. For it seems plain that, to stay with Kuehl’s example, Brazil’s claim to sovereignty over the Amazon not only affects indigenous peoples but it also has profound and devastating implications for all of the other species and beings that, together with those peoples,

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<sup>10</sup> It is, however, surely interesting that claims to indigenous sovereignty remain so contentious precisely because they are seen as challenging ‘the absolute and perpetual power’ of nation states. Contemporary attempts by international bodies to recognise the ‘rights’ of indigenous peoples tend to avoid the term. For example, The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, while recognizing “that indigenous peoples have suffered from historic injustices as a result of, inter alia, their colonization and dispossession of their lands, territories and resources” does not actually mention the term ‘sovereignty’ at all either in terms of this colonization and dispossession or in terms of indigenous sovereignty (2007:2).

ecologically and politically, constitute (or in too many cases, since so much of the Amazon has been bulldozed and burnt, once constituted) the Amazon's diverse communities.

Kuehls, as might be expected, couches his ecological critique in terms of sovereign claims over cartographically bounded 'territories'. His ecological point is not just that the claim to sovereignty often has devastating social and biological effects, but that, properly understood, ecology might actually constitute a challenge to sovereignty in theory and practice. The fact that the borders of nation states are ecologically and eco-politically porous, that ecological repercussions are not territorially bounded, enables him to find hopeful grounds for resistance to ecological sovereignty.

Despite its many important insights Kuehls approach does not, however, really address the question of what sovereignty *is*, in terms of its particular mode of operation as a governing principle, that is to say, what its actual employment involves and how we might recognize its presence rather than that of any other form of authority. It also does not explain who is sovereign and why? And, for all Kuehl's valuable insights, the philosophical connections between the sovereign oppression of peoples and natures remain obscure. What is more, from Kuehls' position, it seems that sovereignty is ultimately eco-politically unachievable, whereas, we would want to continue to emphasize the devastating results of its actually being exercised. Our concern then, is not just a wrongful application of sovereignty in particular cases, but rather its all too effective anti-political and anti-ecological *modus operandi*.

**What is sovereignty?**

It would be impossible to review here the immense and still burgeoning literature on sovereignty, (but see Hinsley, 1986, Bartelson, 1996; Krasner, 1999 for conceptual and historical overviews).<sup>11</sup> However, it might seem strange to be making an argument about the eco-political dangers of sovereignty in a period when so many academics are arguing that if national sovereignty ever did exist then it has been fatally compromised by a wide variety of external factors including neoliberal economic globalization, transfers of knowledge / power through social media and the internet, international institutions, corporations, and treaties (for example those concerning human rights), and even through the recognition of transnational ecological problems like climate change. The form of sovereignty judged to be compromised and in decline here is usually a naïve post-Westphalian view of nation-states as completely autonomous and tightly bounded geographic territories with absolute political authority over all activities occurring within their own borders.

It is easy to see how (as Kuehls, in his own ecological terms, also argues) most nation-states do not, and could not, come close to such an ideal. The naïve view of the sovereign nation state is historically inaccurate, empirically compromised by all kinds of factors, and, especially according to Krasner, articulated and employed in an entirely partisan manner as and when it suits powerful international players to do so.

Both Agnew and Krasner do, however recognise the continued role discourses of sovereignty play in a far from homogenous world-order. For Krasner, this role is primarily ideological, but Agnew argues strongly for the presence of more diverse forms of “sovereignty regimes”, some closer to the territorial nation-state model, others much more diffuse and ‘globalist’. For Agnew,

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<sup>11</sup> Hinsley, F. H. (1986) *Sovereignty* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Bartelson, Jens (1995) *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Krasner, Stephen D. (1999) *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

sovereignty may be something of a “social construction”, but it is nonetheless real in terms of its being “exercised effectively over time and space” (Agnew, 2009: 129). The problem here is, that Agnew too provides little discussion of how and why we should refer to these regimes as, in his terms, a “dominant calculus of rule” that constitutes a form of ‘sovereignty’, rather just as institutionally, economically, culturally and geographically etc. different modes of articulating power. The unanswered question, once again, is what *is* the ‘sovereignty’ that operates in and is constituted through these regimes?

This is where Giorgio Agamben’s critical analysis of Carl Schmitt’s definition of sovereignty proves useful (Agamben, 1998, 2005).<sup>12</sup> Schmitt suggested an *operative* definition that highlights the actual exercise of sovereignty according to which: “Sovereign is he who decides upon the exception” (Schmitt, 2005: 5) That is to say, it is the mark of sovereignty to be able to decide what counts as an ‘exceptional’ circumstance where certain people’s individual and /or collective political life, their capacity to express themselves individually and in community with others through their public words and deeds, can be politically stripped from them, reducing them to a condition Giorgio Agamben refers to as ‘bare life’. Declaring this state of exception or state of emergency – that is, making a legal and political decision to suspend the rule of law and politics – is, according to Schmitt, the defining feature of the sovereign. The state of exception is one where a given population finds itself ‘suspended’ in, what Agamben (1998: 64) calls, a ‘zone of indistinction’ or indeterminacy, simultaneously ‘included’ under the scope of the sovereign’s decisions while ‘excluded’ from the normal legal-political order that sovereign is supposed to represent and embody.

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<sup>12</sup> Agamben, Giorgio (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* Stanford: Stanford University Press. Agnew makes some brief and dismissive remarks on Agamben’s understanding of sovereignty but seems to fundamentally misunderstand his approach. (Agnew, 2009: 54-5, 100, 210)

In Agamben's (1998: 54) terms sovereignty is a 'limit concept', a place of extreme decision made in circumstances that, precisely because such circumstances are deemed *exceptional*, cannot be formally codified by (included within) the legal-political order in advance. From this perspective, sovereignty, whether exercised in democratic or totalitarian states, or through bodies and regimes other than nation states, (although Schmitt's work is itself state focused) is actually identifiable by the making of decisions regarding when and where people are to be made *subject to* laws that simultaneously exclude them from exercising the capacities that would make them recognizably 'subjects' in broader political and ethical senses. These states of emergency / exception *may* be temporary measures but the more geographically localized, permanent, and intensely focused this enactment of sovereignty is, the more obviously anti-political and unethical its consequences.<sup>13</sup> Examples of how sovereignty has been/is exercised are particularly relevant to food sovereignty, as they speak to sovereignty's *real* and demonstrated social and ecological consequences.

Agamben (1998) famously cites Guantanamo Bay as a paradigmatic example of a location where a specific population finds itself confined by an exceptional decision that suspends their status as political or legal subjects, making them subject to but placing them outside the law. The most extreme case, he claims, was that of the concentration camp. The procedures and powers, that instituted the camps were those invoked under the 'state of emergency' declared by Hitler suspending provisions for civil liberties under the Weimar constitution.

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<sup>13</sup> Schmitt, of course, following Hobbes, thought this sovereign power necessary and, furthermore, notoriously supported the Nazi declaration of a state of emergency that suspended the provisions of the Weimar constitution protecting personal liberties.

Now Agamben gives little attention to the role of sovereignty in colonialism but it is not hard to recognise exactly this *modus operandi* in terms of the treatment, indeed sometimes genocidal treatment, of indigenous peoples by settler societies. Here individuals and peoples were, and still are, made subject to a sovereignty that simultaneously includes them within its remit yet leaves them suspended in a ‘zone of indeterminacy’. Morgensen, for example, argues that

“Agamben’s work illuminates how Indigenous peoples are ... in a state of exception to Western law, which ... explains Indigenous peoples’ seemingly contradictory incorporation within and excision from the body of white settler nations” (Morgensen, 2011: 52).<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Morgensen, (rather like Anghie, see above) notes that sovereignty, with all its biopolitical implications, might actually be regarded as having first been developed in its modern form through colonial encounters and in the specific contexts of making decisions regarding the legal-political status of Indigenous peoples. In this sense Indigenous peoples became paradigmatic cases of sovereignty’s enactment and still remain in this anomalous position in settler states.<sup>15</sup> This is why, as Rifkin (2009) suggests, we might want, to “Indigenize Agamben”.<sup>16</sup>

It is vital to recognise then, that sovereignty, in Agamben’s sense, is not some-*thing* that a nation-state or a regime possesses, it is a power invoked by and for specific purposes, or as

<sup>14</sup> Morgensen, Scott Lauria (2011) The Biopolitics of Settler Colonialism: Right Here, Right Now, *Settler Colonial Studies*, 1:1, pp. 52-76, DOI: 10.1080/2201473X.2011.10648801

<sup>15</sup> “The performative citation of sovereignty by the United States depends on the creation of a state of exception for Native peoples. The content of ‘sovereignty’ in [legal] decisions is the assertion of the authority to treat Native peoples as having constrained, diminished, political control over themselves and their lands, and such a contention rests on the assumption that despite their existence before and after the founding of the United States as “separate people[s], with the power of regulating their internal and social relations” (U.S. v. Kagama, 381 82), they somehow do not have equivalent status to ‘foreign’ nations” (Rifkin, 2009: 97).

<sup>16</sup> Rifkin, Mark (2009) ‘Indigenizing Agamben: Rethinking Sovereignty in Light of The “Peculiar” Status of Native Peoples’ *Cultural Critique* 73 pp. 88-124.

Judith Butler (2004: 82) puts it: “Sovereignty is what is tactically produced through the very mechanism of its self-justification”.<sup>17</sup> Sovereignty is *performative*. Sovereignty *is*, for example, that which is instantiated in those very legal and political decisions that place(d) indigenous populations in this anomalous ‘zone of indistinction’ as subject nations under settler colonialism but having no legal claim to contest that sovereignty.

In other words, Canada’s native people are recognized as “sovereign nations through legal instruments” but when it suits the state those “agreements have been infringed and degraded and put aside” (Alfred 2015: 4).<sup>18</sup> And this pattern still exists, for example, the *Roger William v. British Columbia* decision was hailed as a landmark for aboriginal title and claims. However, as Alfred notes, “the last paragraph of the decision, which is the same paragraph that is in every self-government agreement, says that aboriginal title exists but is subject to infringement if the national interest is at stake” (Alfred 2015: 4).<sup>19</sup>

Despite Agamben’s lack of attention to colonialism his own work certainly supports this extended reading. For example, when Agamben notes how the ‘state of nature’, that purportedly ‘pre-institutional’ or pre-civil condition to which indigenous populations were often relegated and confined by Enlightenment philosophers and under settler societies is intimately tied to the production of states of exception:

“The state of nature and the state of exception are nothing but two sides of a single topological process in which what was presumed as external (the state of nature) now

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<sup>17</sup> Butler, Judith (2004) *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, New York: Verso.

<sup>18</sup> Alfred, T. (2015). *Cultural strength: restoring the place of indigenous knowledge in practice and policy*. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2015(1)

<sup>19</sup> Alfred, T. (2015). *Cultural strength: restoring the place of indigenous knowledge in practice and policy*. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2015(1)

reappears, as in a Möbius strip ....in the inside (as state of exception). (Agamben, 1998: 37)

This also supports Rifkin and Morgensen's attempts to connect Agamben's arguments with the work of Indigenous scholars critical of the historical and continuing role of ideas of the 'state of nature' (Henderson)<sup>20</sup> and sovereignty. Alfred, for example, argues that

“Sovereignty implies a set of values and objectives in direct opposition to those found in traditional indigenous philosophies... the struggle for justice would be better served by undermining the myth of state sovereignty than by carving out a small and dependent space for indigenous peoples within it” (Alfred, 2009: 81-82).

Alfred's sentiments may also apply to food sovereignty movements that, in principle, contradict state sovereignty, but *actually* operate within it (Roman-Alcalá, 2016). Such expressions may lend themselves to the 'myth' that state sovereignty “maintains an ‘overriding sovereignty’” (Rifkin, 2009:112).

What, though, might we mean by ecological sovereignty, since the understanding of humans as *bios politikos* and the potential to strip them of this political life hardly seems to apply to other species? What is ecological sovereignty, how is it performed, how is it to be understood as an integral part of sovereignty's *modus operandi* in general?

We might, perhaps, begin by recognizing connections to that 'state of nature' which Agamben links so closely to the state of exception, but which also served to tie indigenous populations with the natural world in such a way as to place both in contrast with and subjection to European

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<sup>20</sup> Henderson, James (Sákéj) Youngblood (2000) 'The context of the State of Nature' in Marie Battiste ed. *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision* Vancouver: UBC Press.

‘civilization’. But, the connection goes deeper still. For, as one of us (XXXX, 2011) has previously argued, the political ‘state of exception’ also has an ecological parallel, albeit one that does not concern Agamben at all. Namely, that the reduction of political life to bare life is mirrored ecologically by the sovereign decision to reduce non-human beings and things, to no more than *resources*. That is to declare aspects of the non-human world to be nothing more than an instrumental means to certain human ends, rather than constitutive parts of a creation that in no sense begins or ends with human beings. Ecological sovereignty is the legal-political stripping of the more-than-just-human of its own constitutive roles in creating diverse ecological and eco-political) communities. This treatment of the entire non-human world as ‘standing reserve’ is, of course, a perspective that is absolutely foundational to the ideology and practices of global capitalism, and also by those forms of theoretical Marxism which tend to regard nature only in terms of raw materials and / or the production of *use-values*, even as they critique the predominance of exchange-values in capitalism (XXXX, 2001).<sup>21</sup> In this sense too, the Marxism that informs many strands of the food sovereignty movement inevitably and explicitly regards sovereignty as control over natural ‘resources’, as indeed does a focus on nature as nothing more than ‘food’, for humans.

Historically speaking (and once again especially in terms of colonialism) sovereignty has been explicitly bound up with making resource claims over the non-human world, whether this relates to oil, water, wood, rubber, spices, minerals, genetic material and so on. This is, of course, Keuhls point (see above) But we also need to see what is specific about the *modus operandi* of sovereignty, namely that such decisions *define* sovereignty. Living beings, ecological

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<sup>21</sup> XXXX (2001)

communities, and landscapes are legally-politically reduced by the action of sovereignty to their resource potential, even if, today this might be couched in eco-bureaucratic parlance as ‘ecosystem services’ (Sullivan, 2010).<sup>22</sup> They are laid open to exploitation by a power that decides that only their current ‘usefulness’ matters, whether in terms of creating use or exchange values. Ironically, even those areas designated by sovereign powers as ‘nature *reserves*’ only require such protection because they were initially deemed by this same sovereign power to be nothing more than potential resources. They are, to varying extents, reserved from current use but are still held in yet another ‘zone of indeterminacy’ (XXXX, 2011).

Modern sovereignty is not then, as Morgensen and Rifkin suggest, *just* something that emerged in and through colonial decisions about *human* states of exception. It has also and always been invoked in and through decisions (often ecologically catastrophic decisions) that have determined that certain aspects of the natural world are to be regarded as no more than ‘natural resources’. Unfortunately, many environmentalists also uncritically adopt language that reduces nature to nothing more than a store of natural resources, thereby promulgating and exemplifying the idea that humans have sovereignty over the world.

Again, we need to recognize that these ecological and political aspects of sovereignty are often conjoined, as is obviously the case in the Amazon. Current disputes about ecology and indigenous ‘rights’ can also be seen through this lens. One does not need to ‘imagine’ cases where a government might, say, decide to over-ride its own environmental regulations and treaty

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<sup>22</sup> Sullivan, Sian (2010) ‘Ecosystem Service Commodities’ - A New Imperial Ecology? Implications for Animist Immanent Ecologies, with Deleuze and Guattari’ *New Formations* 69 pp.111-128

obligations to force through an oil pipe-line on the basis that it is an exception vital to the nation's survival and prosperity! This happens on a regular basis and *this* is precisely how sovereignty is exercised.

### **Food Sovereignty?**

This particular understanding of sovereignty can do a lot of ethical and political work: It allows us to identify what distinguishes sovereignty from other modes of articulation of power, to recognize its presence in how it operates socio-politically and ecologically, it explains its often devastating anti-political and anti-ecological effects, and provides an explanation that fits with its colonial history and its actual place in legal-constitutional discourses and practices. But the question here, of course, is “should it affect the way we think about claims concerning food sovereignty?” *This* way of defining sovereignty seemingly has very little to do with the ways that those writing about various food sovereignty movements actually employ the term. Even those who find inconsistencies in competing claims to food sovereignty recognise that

“efforts around food sovereignty open up new political spaces in an ongoing struggle around control over food systems at different scales” (Mckay et al, 2014:1175).<sup>23</sup>

This opening up of political space is clearly the very opposite of Schmitt, Benjamin, and Agamben's understandings of how sovereignty is exercised. Indeed, we would argue, many aspects of the food sovereignty movement could and *should* be seen as in direct conflict with the very idea of sovereignty as it actually evolved and was exercised in and through its colonial and anti-ecological past and its anti-political and unethical operations.

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<sup>23</sup> Mckay, B., Nehring, R., & Walsh-Dilley, M. (2014) ‘The “State” of Food Sovereignty in Latin America: Political Projects and Alternative Pathways in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia’ *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 41(6) pp.1175–1200. Mckay also notes that “embedded in food sovereignty is a contradictory notion of sovereignty, requiring simultaneously a strong developmentalist state and the redistribution of power to facilitate direct control over food systems in ways that may threaten the state”(1175).

There is a real conflict between the actual history and role of sovereignty and the political, ethical, and ecological aspirations of the food sovereignty movement that is rarely addressed. No doubt, this tension also explains why so many attempts to ‘define’ the sovereignty of food sovereignty skim over or entirely ignore its historical and anti-political associations offering instead a variety of very different and much more positive ‘definitions’ or simply refusing to define sovereignty at all. However, if there is anything at all to Agamben’s arguments, we should be very wary of claims about what Conversi (2016: 2) refers to as the “shifting meaning of sovereignty”.<sup>24</sup>

There are two related points needing to be made here. First regarding the extensive, and sometimes irreconcilable, differences in the food sovereignty literature about what ‘sovereignty’ actually means, and second, regarding attempts to resolve (or evade the repercussions of) these differences by simply glossing over such differences and / or arguing that sovereignty can mean pretty much anything we want it to mean.

Take the following exemplary accounts. For Schiavoni (2015)

“*food* sovereignty is a dynamic process... less about building silos (literally and figuratively) and more about building relationships” (478).

“By its very definition, food sovereignty runs contrary to the idea of there being any singular, absolute authority with respect to the food system (467-8).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Conversi, D. (2016). Sovereignty in a Changing World: From Westphalia to Food Sovereignty. *Globalizations*, (April), 1–15.

<sup>25</sup> Schiavoni, C. M. (2015) ‘Competing Sovereignties, Contested Processes: Insights from the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment’ *Globalizations* 12(4) pp.466–480.

“there are in fact ‘multiple sovereignties’ of food sovereignty that cut across jurisdictions and scales” (466).

For Patel (2009) it *should* be about

“a right to shape food policy ... food sovereignty demands that such rights be respected, protected, and fulfilled” ( 667).<sup>26</sup>

And for Iles & Montenegro de Wit (2015) sovereignty is

“the capacity to make binding decisions and to oversee their implementation. We would add that sovereignty includes the capacity to act authoritatively (or asserting agency); the ability to influence political and economic processes; and the rights to participate and to be consulted” ( 485).<sup>27</sup>

Despite her explicit aim of clarifying the sovereignty in food sovereignty Schiavoni (2015) really does something rather different, identifying numerous actors and influences at all kinds of geographical, political, and economic levels that she then labels competing sovereignties. Sovereignty is multiplied – or rather challenges to the naïve view of state sovereignty are multiplied – but sovereignty itself remains a vague catch-all term that evades any and all attempts to articulate it theoretically. Comparing Patel and Iles and Montenegro it seems obvious that the ability to “participate” and be “consulted” is not at all the same thing as a formal “right to shape” policy (however that right might actually be manifested) *or* the capacity to “act authoritatively” *or* to “make binding decisions” – and again the question arises binding on whom or what and in what sense(s) and what effects do these binding decisions have on ethics, politics and ecology?

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<sup>26</sup> Patel, Raj (2009) ‘Food Sovereignty’ *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36(3), 663-706.

<sup>27</sup> Iles, Alistair & De Wit, Maywa Montenegro (2015) *Globalizations* 12 (4) pp.481–497, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2014.957587>

On reflection it seems clear that many of the (sometimes conflicting) things being argued for in terms of the sovereignty of food sovereignty have either only a very nebulous association with dominant Western understandings of the term or they even seem to pose a *direct challenge* to sovereignty. *That is, in an important sense, precisely why the movement is so important.* But this suggests that there are potentially serious problems in attempts to espouse new, alternative, and often unspecified, forms of ‘sovereignty’, especially if, as Patel remarks:

“food sovereignty paradoxically displaces one sovereign, but remains silent about others”  
(Patel 2009: 668).

This silence, especially as it relates to how sovereignty developed through the genocidal oppression of Indigenous peoples and more-than-just-human beings, is a matter of very real concern. Sovereignty’s past and present modes of operation cannot, we would argue, simply be glossed over or ignored. They need to be explicitly recognized if the term is to be used and this needs to happen before we go looking for new definitions of food sovereignty. Simply refusing to define it at all risks it standing as little more than an empty signifier waiting to be re-filled by those who take it upon themselves to wield exceptional powers.

Again, to be clear, our point is not at all to suggest that all of those working under the umbrella of food sovereignty should or could chose to adopt one essential definition. As McMichael (2014) notes ‘food sovereignty’ itself is a form of ‘strategic essentialism’—uniting many unique groups under a common set of values. We are certainly not making an argument against diversity; far from it. We accept that:

“The strength of this global movement is precisely that it differs from place to place”  
(Bové and Dufour 2001: 168).

We are arguing for a necessary awareness about the dangers exemplified by sovereignty in all its forms.

A direct parallel can be drawn here with discussions regarding sovereignty in environmental politics. Many have criticized environmentalism as a political movement for lacking a unified set of concerns, a unified ideology or political program or principles, or even a unitary definition of the environment. But, as with the food sovereignty movement, environmentalism’s diversity is (usually) its political strength and sustaining diversity is also, not accidentally, one of its core concerns. Sovereignty, though, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient term to encompass eco-political ideas and practices, even, indeed especially, in terms of more radical form of environmentalism concerned to critique global capitalism, to encourage decentralized political initiatives, to recognise the diversity of ecological – human relations and so on.

Environmentalists should be suspicious of any and all recourse to notions of sovereignty (XXXX, 2011). For example, only anti-political Malthusians might argue that ‘nature’ ought to be regarded as ‘sovereign’, and there is widespread criticism of notions like ‘consumer sovereignty’ (Princen, 2010).<sup>28</sup> Few radical environmentalists want to revive the prerogatives of national sovereignty even in order to defend ecological communities against the global market’s fluctuations or arbitrary decisions – though they may sometimes want to call on states to enact legal protections. Where there have been discussions of Green Sovereignty, many of the

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<sup>28</sup> Princen, Thomas (2010) ‘Consumer Sovereignty, Heroic Sacrifice: Two Insidious Concepts in an Endlessly Expansionist Economy’ in Michael Maniates and John M. Meyer eds. *The Environmental Politics of Sacrifice* Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press.

participants explicitly recognize its heritage in colonialism, nation building, and nature reducing (Lipschutz 1998).<sup>29</sup>

It does not seem, then, as though the term ‘environmental or Green *sovereignty*’ could ever be adopted as an umbrella term for radical environmentalism despite many similarities with the food sovereignty movement. The comparison here, is quite close. After all, just as food sovereignty is often contrasted with food security, (Schanbacher 2010, ix)<sup>30</sup> environmentalists too, are often worried about a focus that is relatively unconcerned with just how ‘environmental security’ is achieved and what its eco-political costs might be. They are also wary of state and even military co-option of discourses around ‘environmental security’ (Dalby, 2002).<sup>31</sup> For the most part they look to other discursive frames. This explains why, although there are many attempts to elucidate ideas that overlap with and inform notions of sustainable and more autonomous ecological communities, like ‘bioregionalism’, (McGinnis, 1999)<sup>32</sup> discussions of Green Sovereignty, have largely been limited to issues about reinforcing nation states powers against the environmental depredations of global capital.

Litfin (1998) is not as critical of these issues when employing ‘sovereignty’ in her discussions of the greening of sovereignty. She argues that enforcing environmental treaties and regulations is done by the state, and thus, advocating for a different kind of ‘sovereignty’ may be necessary; a rejection of sovereignty may actually hinder real progress on environmental issues. Advocates of

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<sup>29</sup> Lipschutz, Ronnie D. (1998) ‘The Nature of Sovereignty the Sovereignty of Nature: Problematizing the Boundaries between Self, Society, State and System’ in Karen Litfin ed. *The Greening of Sovereignty in World Politics* Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press.

<sup>30</sup> Schanbacher, W.D. 2010. *The Politics of Food: The Global Conflict Between Food Security and Food Sovereignty* Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

<sup>31</sup> Dalby, Simon (2002) *Environmental Security* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>32</sup> McGinnis, Michael Vincent ed. (1999) *Bioregionalism* London: Routledge.

this view contend that sovereignty has adapted over time and can be used as a tool to further practical solutions to environmental issues (Conversi 2016; Iles and Montenegro de Wit 2015; Litfin 1998). But, Litfin still recognizes the role of the state as a sovereign actor.

Proponents of this strategy, like Eckersley (2004) certainly try to argue that Green Sovereignty means something quite different to its previous incarnations, although just what that difference entails is sometimes difficult to fathom since, like Conversi and Litfin, Eckersley argues that sovereignty is an almost infinitely malleable term;

“sovereignty is a changing, derivative principle the meaning of which arises from the changing constitutive discourses that underpin it” (Eckersley, 2004: 203).<sup>33</sup>

But if sovereignty is so protean then we are left wondering what exactly signifies its power to resist global capitalism? The answer, we think, is precisely that the such Green States would be sovereign insofar as they become the locus for making exceptional decisions regarding what parts of nature within their territories are reducible to being merely a resource (XXXX, 2011).

The principle of sovereignty over nature is thereby left intact.<sup>34</sup>

Eckersley and Conversi would seem to agree upon sovereignty’s malleability. Indeed, Conversi goes further, drawing on the social theory of Zygmunt Bauman, to claim that we live in an era of “liquid sovereignty”. Interestingly, though, as Conversi admits, Bauman himself, for all of his love of liquid appellations, “never uses the term ‘liquid sovereignty’” (Conversi, 2016: 5). And there is a good reason for this, in the sense that Bauman is fully aware of Schmitt’s definition of sovereignty and of sovereignty’s dangers. He even uses it to himself define sovereignty as

<sup>33</sup> Eckersley, Robyn (2004) *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty* Cambridge Mass. MIT Press.

<sup>34</sup> This is not to dispute the intentions of those, like Eckersley, making such arguments, or the idea of trying to green certain aspects of the state but to challenge the underlying assumption of human sovereignty over nature itself.

“the power to define the limits of humanity, the lives of those humans who have fallen or have been thrown outside those limits are unworthy of being lived” (Bauman cited in Conversi, 2016: 5)

In other words, Bauman recognises that in an operative definition of sovereignty what matters is precisely sovereignty’s ability to *solidify* power, to define *for itself in its enactment* a bounded (but not necessarily just territorial) regime over which it has the power to exclude the political, ethical (and we would add) the ecological.

So while it may well be that due to various forces, including economic globalization, national sovereignty in its traditional sense has been eroded, the mark of its presence is exhibited precisely in those instances, those exceptions, where it is exercised to suspend political activities and/or instrumentally reduce the ecological. This should not be understood *narrowly* in terms of a contest between the erosion of national sovereignty by economic forces but more broadly in terms of a long-enacted contest between differentially applied forms of sovereignty and, on the other hand, *an ecological and food politics* that *contests* the anti-political and anti-ecological principle of sovereignty as such. This is, ironically a movement that also now includes a movement that self-identifies as one of ‘food sovereignty’!

## **Conclusion**

We have argued that there are very good reasons, historical, theoretical, practical, why the sovereignty in food sovereignty really does need to be addressed. At the very least we need to recognise the fundamental ways that the performance of sovereignty has been, and is still, caught up in making decisions that are potentially and actually devastating to those, human and non-

human beings thereby placed in zones of indeterminacy. Clearly the term sovereignty as it applies to states still does have very close relations to those past applications. One danger then is that food sovereignty may, for example, buy into aspects of this by adding its support to claims to national sovereignty against the depredations of globalization, when nationalism is certainly not always a positive or radical political force, and when the exercise of national sovereignty is not a positive force for all people and all environments and their constituents.

There are clear links between traditional notions of sovereignty and some applications of food sovereignty which tend “to influence the legitimacy and rules of states more than they have undermined states’ capacity” (1397).<sup>35</sup> For example, in Ecuador, in 2008, a bottom-up movement succeeded in pressuring political officials to incorporate food sovereignty into its constitution, which now reads: “Food Sovereignty constitutes an objective and strategic obligation of the state” (Government of Ecuador in Wittman, Desmarais and Wiebe 2010:9). After further negotiations, Article 401 declares Ecuador free of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) *unless* the state determines it is in the interest of the nation to introduce such crops into the country.<sup>36</sup> Not surprisingly, it seems the President recently invoked that power to pass a controversial law that allows transgenic seeds into the country for ‘research purposes’.<sup>37</sup>

As we have seen, there is a very significant strand of modern political philosophy that has recognized the need for a radical critique of the history and antipolitical role of sovereignty as a core concept underlying Western political states and their claims to legitimacy over geographical

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<sup>35</sup> Roman-Alcalá, A. (2016). Conceptualising components, conditions and trajectories of food sovereignty's 'sovereignty'. *Third World Quarterly*, 37(8), 1388.

<sup>36</sup> Republic of Ecuador. 2008. *CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF ECUADOR*

<sup>37</sup> Norero, Daniel. 2017. “Ecuador passes law allowing GMO crop research” retrieved October 12, 2017 (<https://geneticliteracyproject.org/2017/06/20/ecuador-passes-law-allowing-gmo-crop-research/>)

terrains, indigenous peoples and ‘nature’ (re-envisioned *through the actual exercise of sovereignty* (xxxx 2011) as nothing more than ‘natural resources’). This historical and continuing exercise of sovereignty runs counter to the actual aims of many of those involved in promoting the more radical aspects of the food sovereignty movement. The tension here cannot just be wished away by claiming that words can mean anything we want them to mean, that they are infinitely malleable, or can simply be excised from their previous meanings and applications. It is our belief that a radical critique of the current state of food production also needs to be conjoined with a radical critique of the principals of sovereignty that actually made and make this system possible. This critique needs to become *explicit* in food sovereignty literature.

Resistance to this critique seems to come from the political assumptions of all mainstream political theories in modern Western thought that simply assume that human beings do have the unquestionable right to assert sovereignty in the sense outlined here over the rest of the natural world. However, just as Agamben’s suggests that political life is not to be understood as a means to an end, but something constitutive of the very possibility of human community (a community that is in Jean-Luc Nancy’s (1991)<sup>38</sup> terms, ‘inoperative’, that is, not just a matter of *instrumental* relations) so we might say, the more-than-just human world too is not just a means to human ends, and our varying senses of community within the worlds so created, should never be reducible to matters of bare-life and / or resources. Rather, our varying senses of community can, and should, be constituted with and through the ethical and political and cultural recognition of the more-than-just human role in creating such communities. Given today’s environmental problems it is incumbent on any genuinely progressive political movement to recognise this.

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<sup>38</sup> Nancy, Jean-Luc (1997) *The Inoperative Community* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Here we should note that there are many signs of this recognition within the food sovereignty movement. Indigenous movements are often at the forefront, partly due to their own experiences of, and resistance to, a colonial legacy of sovereignty. Where Indigenous communities are concerned, the consequences and legacies of historical discrimination and colonial practices still tend to generate much higher food insecurity rates and health issues — far exceeding, in Canada’s case, for example, the national average (Desmarais and Wittman 2014). Indigenous scholars argue that traditional farming, hunting and cultural practices can alleviate some of these issues within their communities. Indeed, Daigle, (2016) argues that

“Indigenous peoples have remained diverse by continually transmitting and renewing their ontologies through their languages, artistic and storytelling traditions, spiritual ceremonies, annual community gatherings, and through the harvesting and sharing of their local food. It is these ontologies and the practices in which they are transmitted ... that cultivate an alternative politics for Indigenous self-determination” (Daigle, 2016: ).<sup>39</sup>

Organizations such as the British Columbia Food Systems Network (BCFSN) and Food Secure Canada Indigenous Circle are engaging in discussions to determine how Indigenous food sovereignty can reflect their traditions, customs, and autonomy. What is most relevant here, though, is that when participants, scholars, and activists brought some of their concerns to the People’s Food Policy Project (PFPP) this gave rise to a call for an additional, seventh principle, to the existent six principles of food sovereignty (Desmarais and Wittman 2014). The seventh

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<sup>39</sup> Daigle, Michelle (2016) ‘Awawanenitakik: The spatial politics of recognition and relational geographies of Indigenous self-determination’ *The Canadian Geographer* 60 (2) pp.259-269.

principle resonates with spiritual values that believe in the inherent value of the Earth as something that is never reducible to just a resource:

“food is sacred [and....] the ways in which we get food are similarly sacred, Mother Earth cannot be enslaved and forced to produce what we want, when and where we want it, through our technological tools (Kneen 2011:92).

Indigenous teachings are often expressions of the idea that food, land, and other species should be respected through recognition of their co-creative roles in producing and sustaining communities and cultural practices (People’s Food Policy Project 2011). Indigenous food sovereignty is therefore focused on ethical concerns for both people and nature, who together constitute a world of richness and diversity from which no beings, human or non-human, can ever be excepted. As Morrison put it

“Food is a gift from the Creator. In this respect, the right to food is sacred and *cannot be constrained or recalled by colonial laws, policies, or institutions*. Indigenous food sovereignty is ultimately achieved by upholding our long-standing sacred responsibilities to nurture healthy, interdependent relationships with the land, plants and animals that provide us with our food” (2011: 100 emphasis added).

Analogies between food sovereignty’s principles and indigenous efforts towards culturally appropriate food systems have been drawn to explore the movement’s potential (Grey and Patel 2015). Kamal et al.’s (2015) case study of the *O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (OPCN)* and their community-based food system, Ithinto Mechisowin (IMP), articulates the important milestones Indigenous movements have made in regaining control of resources through—what is labeled

as—‘food sovereignty’ principles. ‘Sovereignty’, in this regard, is viewed as a way to re-establish mutually beneficial relationships with the land, wildlife, and water. These interpretations of ‘sovereignty’ separate it from its origins: “the way in which OPCN’s food champions use the term food sovereignty, neither ‘food’ nor ‘sovereignty’ retains their classical meanings” (Kamal et al. 2015: 570). But if this is the case then we desperately need a debate about how and in what ways this definition of sovereignty differs from meanings that are *not just classical* but actually revealed on a daily basis in the contemporary anti-political exercise of sovereignty.

Our article is in no sense an attempt to deny the significance of these endeavours, quite the contrary. Rather we want to argue how a widely accepted definition of sovereignty, one that plays a major role in other strands of political theory across the political spectrum, suggests that the dangers in applying this term should not be understated. Discourses and language shape how we think about the world and have real ecological and political consequences. As such, there are still important issues and conflicts that need to be addressed within the food sovereignty framework. Some indigenous communities are, we believe right to express discomfort with ‘sovereignty’ and an ecological perspective on sovereignty should also support such wariness. (Alfred 1999; Grey and Patel 2015).

Of course, an ambiguity about the ‘sovereignty’ in food sovereignty is still present here, in ongoing political and ethical debates regarding whether this movement constitutes, as Morrison certainly suggests, a different understanding of sovereignty or perhaps, from other perspectives

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requires an outright rejection of sovereignty (Alfred, 1999). But this is a debate, like that in food sovereignty in general, to which this article hopes to make a small contribution.