A Political-Economy of Some Twenty-First Century Food Rebellions

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Introduction[3]

In 2007 and 2008, the world witnessed the return of one of the oldest forms of collective action, the food rebellion. Countries where protests occurred ranged from Italy, where 'Pasta Protests' in September 2007 were directed at the failure of the Prodi government to prevent a 30% rise in the price of pasta, to Haiti, where protesters railed against President Préval's impassive response to the doubling in the price of rice over the course of a single week. Other countries in which rebellions were reported included Uzbekistan, Morocco, Guinea, Mauritania, Senegal, West Bengal, Indonesia, Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Yemen, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Mexico, and Argentina, and some commentators have estimated that thirty countries experienced some sort of food protest over this period (Jafri 2008).

The most obvious cause of these protests was the sudden and steep global rise in commodity prices, increases that were passed on directly to consumers, particularly those in urban areas. In developing an interpretation of these events, it is worth recalling the range of protests that erupted in the Global South nearly twenty years ago, that earned the moniker 'IMF riots' (Walton and Seddon, 1994), and which were likewise linked to steep price rises for consumers. Between 1976 and 1982, there were at least 146 such protests, with a peak at the beginning of the widespread imposition of monetarist economic policy

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between 1983 and1985. The consequences of the adoption of this monetary policy were to dismantle elements of state entitlement and macroeconomic protection that shielded citizens from the fluctuations of the international market. As a result, price fluctuations were, as today, much more rapidly communicated to the urban residents of the Global South. Based on this, Walton and Seddon derive a definition that austerity protests be defined as "large-scale collective actions including political demonstrations, general strikes, and riots, which are animated by grievances over state policies of economic liberalization, implemented in response to the debt crisis and market reforms urged by international agencies" (1994: 39). They further suggest that because the economic policies that mandated austerity were often authored by multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, such protests have come to be called 'IMF riots'. The term can, however, be a little misleading, in that it suggests that the ire of the crowds was directed exclusively at a Bretton Woods institution rather than at specific policies and individuals, domestic and international. Indeed, the strength of the link between actual IMF involvement in economic policy management and subsequent riots has been disputed. Despite strong claims for an association between the two (Walton and Ragin 1990), some scholars have seen a more complex relationship, in which IMF riots occur either at the beginning or several years after a structural adjustment policy (Auvinen 1996). It is safe, however, to conclude that the presence in an economy of the IMF (or other Bretton Woods institutions) is necessary, but not sufficient, to precipitate an 'IMF riot'.

In our argument, we suggest that food riots today are an outcome of the policies embodied in the Bretton Woods Institutions' economic doctrine, insofar as they

dismantled public capacity (specifically food reserves), and deepened food dependency across much of the global South through liberalization of trade in foodstuffs. This economic policy was justified in the name of increasing 'food security', a term with a range of meanings (FAO 2003), but which converge on there being sufficient food available and accessible to any given population. Omitted from the various definitions of food security are notions of power and control, about how a population will earn money to be able to purchase the food that has been made available, or whether indeed a country will be permitted to produce within its borders the food that will be fed to its population (Patel 2009). The then-US US Secretary for Agriculture, John Block, said in 1986 at the beginning of the Uruguay Round of Negotiations of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade that "[the] idea that developing countries should feed themselves is an anachronism from a bygone era. They could better ensure their food security by relying on US agricultural products, which are available, in most cases, at much lower cost." {Bello, 2000 #1993}. The ultimate mechanism for compliance with the demands of food security was the free market, as instituted through the development project (McMichael 1992). It is no small irony, then, that food rebellions are the product of a set of policies licenced by the supposed virtues of food security.

Our argument in this paper is that the food rebellion is not simply about the price and accessibility of staple foods, but is a more complex phenomenon, and concerns the political economy of food provisioning. From a world-historical perspective, the food rebellion has always been about more than food - its appearance has usually signaled significant transitions in political-economic arrangements. Further, we suggest that, like famine, food rebellion often registers a long process leading up to a signal crisis, a

process of structural deprivation and erosion of entitlement (cf George, 1977). Food rebellions are, in other words, political, and therefore their interpretation needs to be threaded through endogenous political debates and power struggles. The term 'IMF riot' does violence to the need to contextualize food rebellions and, used carelessly, 'IMF riot' eliminates the need to see the articulation of international economic elements behind protests to local struggles and organized alternatives to existing structures of power. This is why we argue that while food rebellions may be caused by the political-economy of food security, the protests themselves are agentic moments in movement toward an alternative that is best captured in the term 'food sovereignty'. Food sovereignty was a term generated by the Via Campesina peasant movement in 1996, as a way of specifically addressing the political lacunae of 'food security', and as a way of bringing questions and struggles over power back into thinking about food policy (Desmarais 2007). Food rebellions, we argue, are just such moments. Their outcome may not be what its constituents may wish for, of course, but as we shall see, the spread of food rebellions has a great deal to do with a specific kind of rebellion against the political economy of neoliberalism.

Food rebellion in history

The phenomenon of people taking to the streets to protest hunger has a very long history. Cicero (106BC- 43BC) witnessed one first hand, when his house was attacked by a hungry and angry mob. The first major study of the food riot as a political phenomenon was conducted by E. P. Thompson (1971). Thompson's aim was to tease apart the term 'riot', situating the events surrounding this form of protest in a broader political context.

Key to this was his idea that food rebellions were not a direct function of food shortage in the material economy, but a sign of contest over the rules of how the economy worked. He used the term 'moral economy' to point to the cluster of political and pre-political ideas circulating within society that governed the natural and desirable means of the distribution of common wealth. This moral economy was not only manifest in times of protest, but a fixture of social life and governance in the eighteenth century. "The word 'riot' is", Thompson observed, " too small to encompass all this" (1971: 79). His analysis offered a means to understand some of the more spectacular food riots of the eighteenth century which were not to be found in England, but in France.

Linking French food rebellions to the idea of 'moral economy,' Louise Tilly (1971) points to two key features spawning food protest. First, she suggests the formation of a national market in grain eroded the kinds of local control over the economy that were possible for peasants and the urban poor to exercise in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Second, the French government's withdrawal from strong market regulation and price-setting ended the varieties of paternalism and *noblesse oblige* on which large swathes of the working poor depended in times of crisis. The notion of 'entitlements' has been used to interpret the French Revolution. It was, of course, about more than simply food, but the sentiment 'let them eat cake' – mistakenly attributed to Marie Antoinette rather than, more plausibly, to Maria Theresa of Spain, the wife of Louis XIV - points to the tenor of the protests. Tilly notes that the Sans Culottes had explicit food-related demands: "During the French revolution, the Maximum ..[a] Jacobin version of 'war communism', was a response to entitlement loss" (1983: 339).

It is the dynamics of the moral economy and the perception of injustice, not a simple shortage of food, which best explains the emergence of mass protest in the run up to, and in the fifty years after, the French Revolution. Food rebellions continued in France well into the 1850s. This can again be explained with respect to shifts within the moral economy, for the shift from paternalism to *laissez-faire* was protracted – the replacement of one set of entitlements with another was not smooth or swift, but fragmentary, disjointed and sometimes violence. Theorists attribute the end of protests, however, to the successful completion of the bourgeois project. Protests end when markets in food have successfully been instituted and, similarly, when other forms of protest (such as a strike for higher wages to afford better or more food) became predominant. Karl Polanyi (1957) conceptualized this process as the 'discovery of society,' meaning that pre-industrial conceptions of moral economy were progressively replaced, through social pressure, by rationalized notions of civil rights and social protections in the Western welfare state that emerged in the mid-twentieth century.

Part of this social pressure included food rebellion. At the end of the First World War, a number of instances of food rebellions registered particularly in North America. Food rebellions broke out in Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Toronto and, most notably, in New York (Frank 1985: 264). The price of food in North America had, after 1916, started to rise dramatically. Increasing quantities of North American grain were being diverted to Europe, still in the throes of the First World War. This drain on the grain markets, while welcomed by farmers, caused tremendous hardship in urban areas. However, the hardship was widespread – a further explanation is needed for why some areas saw protest, and others did not. Beyond being in urban areas, the protests had two

key common features – they were usually linked to radical (usually socialist or communist) organisations and, second, the majority of participants and organizers were women. The idea of a 'moral economy' works well here. The gap between expectations and reality were fuelled, on the one hand, by food price inflation making food less attainable, and on the other by revolutionary organising that suggested an economic logic at variance with capitalism. There were, furthermore, no ready alternative means for women to register their protest. In the US, the nineteenth amendment to the constitution, recognising women's right to vote, was only passed in 1920, about five years later (with some variation across provinces) than in Canada. The streets were the only place that women could make their voices heard. Food rebellions were also a means through which organising to win the vote was carried out. As a contemporary New York magazine reported, "the need of votes for women, to strengthen this new woman's movement, will be emphasized at every anti-high price meeting" (Frank 1985: 279).

It was no accident that women found themselves in the front line – the gendered division of labour laid the duties of domestic reproduction at their door. The language of protest in 1917 still rings true. Consider this quote: 'With $14 a week we used to just make a living. With prices as they are now, we could not even live on $2 a day. We would just exist.' The woman who said this was interviewed in New York on the front lines of an East Side Jewish Women's protest. But she might have come from any of the developing countries that have, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries experienced agricultural inflation-related rebellions.

The gap between peoples' sense of 'moral economy' and their experience of poverty within the material economy has been parsed by development economist

Amartya Sen as an 'entitlement failure'. Sen's seminal work on hunger and famine serves as a helpful corollary to Thompson – if the latter's work made it much harder to use the term 'riot' unproblematically, Sen (1981) did the same for the term 'famine'. His work on the 1943 Bengal Famine, in which between 1.5 and 3 million people died, pointed to a key problem in food economics. In times of modern famine, food has always been available. Famine is, in other words, not a result of a food shortage. The reason that people died in Bengal was that they lacked the means to buy food on the open market, which, in turn, was exporting food. Noting that this was not, then, a problem of inadequate supply or want of demand, Sen theorized this crisis as an 'entitlement failure'.

The development and neoliberal food regimes

The outbreak of food rebellions was, perversely enough, the central justification for the mid-twentieth century project of 'development,' elaborated in powerful corridors of post-WWII Washington, London and Paris, and at the Bretton Woods conference of 1944, where the World Bank and its sister institution, the IMF were created. This was the age of 'hunger amidst scarcity' (Araghi 2000), and development discourses formed around the problematic of Third World poverty, as a political threat (Escobar 1995). President Truman's Four Point Declaration of 1948 noted: "The economic life of the poor is primitive and stagnant… Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas."

The vision of 'feeding the world' emerged as Cold War politics, addressing postwar and colonial deprivations via the politics of containment, as communist movements in Europe and the non-European world threatened Western interests (Perkins

1997). With food shortages and famines in the early 1940s, the establishment of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) included a mandate of stabilizing world agriculture and establishing global food security, through food trade management. In 1946, the FAO enunciated its vision:

> The raising of the levels of living of rural populations calls for the improvement of agriculture, rural industrialization, large-scale public works, and social and educational services in the countryside, and the raising of the levels of living of many different races and peoples. This in turn requires a reorientation of world agriculture and of world trade in which food will be treated as an essential of life rather than primarily as merchandise (quoted in Phillips and Ilcan, 2003).

This vision appeared to reverse the outsourcing of the West's food supply to the colonial world, conforming to the stipulations of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). This vision, however, embodied a scientific reductionism regarding agricultural modernization, subjecting 'local knowledges to the supremacy of scientific images of, and universal claims for, food and agriculture' (Phillips and Ilcan, 2003: 436). These claims materialized in agro-technologies and dietary and nutritional sciences (Lang, 2005), reproducing class-based relations of food production and consumption, and realized through the operation of global food markets, contrary to the FAO's vision of de-commodified food. The mobilization of a universal 'scientific agriculture' in the pursuit of 'feeding the world' mirrored the representation of post-colonial societies as uniformly poor and underdeveloped, licensing neo-colonial

interventions to gain access to strategic resources and markets within the context of the Cold War.[4]

In this world order, bilateral power overshadowed multilateralism, even in the area of poverty relief. The overrule by the U.S. of the proposal for a World Food Board by the FAO and the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration is a case in point. President Truman chose instead to pursue bilateral aid programs. The U.S. food aid, or development, regime, formalized in 1954 as PL-480, came to dominate the food trade landscape over the next two decades. U.S.-managed food surpluses were distributed strategically as concessional food aid to states on the geo-political frontline, and/or those regarded as future customers of American agro-exports once they transitioned from aid to trade. This food aid regime reshaped, indeed westernized, social diets of newly urbanized consumers in industrializing regions of the Third World, at the same time as it undermined local farmers with low-priced staple foods (Friedmann, 1982, 1987). The managed construction of the Third World consumer paralleled the decimation of peasant agriculture – each confirmed the simple truths of the development vision, that the western consumption pattern was a universal desire and that peasants were historical residuals, destined to disappear into a modern urban labor force.

Post-colonial states sought to implement this development model in the name of modernity, commercializing public goods (land, forest, water, genetic resources, indigenous knowledges), and extending cash cropping systems to pay for rising imports of technology and luxury consumer goods. Subsistence cultures experienced a sustained assault from cheap food imports and expanding commodity relations. Peasant

[4] Some regions were more equal than others within the early Cold War context - the introduction of industrial agriculture and the administration of food aid followed predictable containment patterns: heavily focused on Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

dispossession intensified with the deepening of colonial mechanisms of primitive accumulation by postcolonial states. From 1950 to 1997, the world's rural population decreased by some 25 percent, and now 63 percent of the world's urban population dwells in, and on the margins of, sprawling cities of the global South (Davis, 2006).

Commercial mono-cropping transformed rural landscapes as the American model of capital/energy-intensive agriculture was universalized through the European Marshall Plan, agribusiness deployment of counterpart funds from the food aid program, and green revolution technologies. Post-war American-style consumption transformed food from its nineteenth-century role of cheapening labor costs to its additional twentieth-century role of opening up a new source of profit. The fast food industry, grossing $110 billion a year in the U.S., exemplifies this movement by serving low-cost convenience foods, based on the expropriation of home-cooking crafts. In the global South, this extends to displacing urban street vendors, paralleling the displacement of peasant communities by feed grain monocultures and cattle pastures for beef exporting, and increasingly tenuous farming under contract for an expanding global supermarket system (Reardon et al, 2003).

The food empire is not simply a set of new commodity flows. It involves a transformation, and integration, of quite contradictory conditions of social reproduction across national borders – whether the integrating mechanism is an imperial state, a world price, or a corporate empire. Producers of global commodities are subject to the competitive relationships that drive corporate accumulation strategies, which both create and exploit an expanding global reserve army of casual labor.

Together these mechanisms form the neoliberal food regime: an ordering of the world food economy that combines state power, the price weapon, and corporate sourcing

strategies. The WTO's Agreement on Agriculture has outlawed artificial price support via trade restrictions, production controls, and state trading boards. While countries of the global South were instructed to open their farm sectors, those of the global North retained their huge subsidies. Decoupling subsidies from prices removed the price floor, establishing an artificially low 'world price' for agricultural commodities. Prices for the major commodities in world trade fell 30 percent or more since 1994, and were at an all-time low for the last century and a half by 1999 (Ritchie 1999, *The Economist* April 17, 1999: 75). But this historic price depression engineered through the North's domestic support policies was not considered 'artificial,' functioning as an indiscriminate weapon of agribusiness against all small to medium-sized farmers through the global dumping of food surpluses (Peine and McMichael, 2005).

The price weapon is enabled by a WTO rule eliminating the right to a national strategy of self-sufficiency. This is the minimum market access rule, which guaranteed food importing, and therefore food exports -- privileging Northern agribusinesses (McMichael 2003). At the Seattle Ministerial in 1999, a Honduran farmer observed: "Today, we cannot sell our own farm products on the markets because of … imports … of cheap food produce from Europe, Canada and the US… Free trade is for multinationals; it is not for the small peasant farmers" (quoted in Madeley 2000: 81). In the latter half of the 1990s, food deficit states experienced a 20 percent rise in food bills, despite record low prices (Murphy 1999: 3), and since decolonization Africa has moved from food self-reliance to importing 25 percent of its food needs. After 9,000 years of food security, Mexico, the home of maize, was transformed by liberalization and NAFTA into a food deficit country, and forced to import yellow corn from the U.S. at the expense

of almost 2 million *campesinos* (Carlsen 2003). The chairman of Cargill observed: "There is a mistaken belief that the greatest agricultural need in the developing world is to develop the capacity to grow food for local consumption. This is misguided. Countries should produce what they produce best – and trade" (quoted in Lynas 2001).

The twenty-first century 'food from nowhere' regime is premised on the displacement of staple foods with exports – whether dumped on the world market, or installed locally as a measure of 'development.' Within the global shrimp economy, for example, the average shrimp farm provides 15 jobs on the farm and 50 security jobs around the farm, while shrimp culture displaces 50,000 people through loss of land, traditional fishing and agriculture. One Filipino fisherman observed: "The shrimp live better than we do. They have electricity, but we don't. The shrimp have clean water, but we don't. The shrimp have lots of food, but we are hungry" (quoted in Tilford 2004: 93). Across the world, conservative estimates are that 20-30 million people have lost their land under the impact of trade liberalization and export agriculture (Madeley 2000: 75).

Dispossessed peasants enter new, global circuits where they produce food for spatially and socially distant consumers, under corporate control. What affluent consumers might experience as a cornucopia of world foods, and what some analysts might view as a world of commodity chains, involves a more far-reaching transformation in the conditions of social reproduction of the corporate empire, characterized by a burgeoning casualization of the labor of displaced rural producers.

The food regime, however, is not simply a corporate affair. It is embedded within the governing orthodoxy of neo-liberalism, and its institutional arsenal – which privileges private over public rights. Structural adjustment loans routinely demand exports as a

solution to debt repayment. In Southern Africa, structural adjustment policies promote export agriculture and replace state marketing boards with private buyers. Producers remain at the mercy of speculators. This fundamental contradiction, whereby 'free markets' exclude and/or starve populations dispossessed by their very implementation, characterizes the neo-liberal food regime and is, as we argue below, the source of today's food rebellions. As a "political regime of global value relations" (Araghi, 2003), the food regime is about the reproduction of wage labor, and, indeed, other forms of labor coming under capital's sway. The so-called era of globalization has been premised on the food regime's generation of cheap labor for manufacturing, service and industrial agricultural sectors, and its supply of relatively cheap industrial foods to subsidize labor costs (McMichael 2005). In these senses, value relations govern the relations of food production and circulation.

Agflation in the Twenty First Century

Having outlined the origins and political economy of the food system in which the most recent rebellions have occurred, we are well equipped to interpret the recent and precipitous fluctuations in food prices, a phenomenon that has been dubbed 'agflation'. Orthodox economists explain the fluctuation using notions of supply and demand, pointing, for instance, to the production dips caused by poor weather in Australia and North America, and the spread of diseases affecting cereals in Central Asia, leading to reduced supply and higher prices. While these phenomena certainly have some explanatory power, they beg questions about how economies were vulnerable to these shocks (bad weather and disease are hardly new phenomena). We can explain this by knowing that the food system is one in which the buffers shielding consumers have been

removed. But to understand the deeper processes at work, it is important to examine the novel appearance in the international economy of a commodity that 'lit the fuse' on agflation, one that directly implicates value relations: agrofuel. The emphasis on food as an exchange-value first, and use-value second, is demonstrated in the ease with which the development industry's mantra of "feeding the world" has given way to the focus on converting agriculture to biomass for alternative energy – a literal "gold rush" in the words of Cargill's executive director (quoted in Howard and Dangl, 2007). Whether a purely corporate strategy to renew profitability or a state-assisted attempt to replace fossil fuels and curb carbon emissions, the fungibility of food and fuel marks a new value threshold for agriculture. This "agrofuels project" (McMichael, 2009) subordinates agriculture to short-sighted (and misguided) alternative energy/emissions targets when the market episteme governs problem framing and solving. While not intrinsically negative, resorting to biofuels to mitigate rather than resolve the so-called "energy crisis" and climate change becomes a project, as much driven by legitimacy concerns as by peak oil and global warming. This project represents the ultimate fetishization of agriculture, in converting a source of human life into an energy input, contributing to rising food prices. Hence the conventional understanding of agflation, in (market) scarcity terms, conceals the relations and processes underlying the appropriation of agriculture for corporate profit (and/or neo-liberal political legitimation).[5]

[5] It is widely known that despite rising grain prices, family farmers experienced a tripling in the price of farm inputs (Holt-Giménez 2008: 27). This was accompanied by, and reflected in, rising fertilizer company profits -- in 2007 Potash Corporation's profits rose 72 percent, and Mosaic's profits rose 141 percent, while, in the first quarter of 2008, Potash net income rose 186 percent, and Mosaic's net income rose more than 1200 percent (GRAIN, 2008:3; Angus, 2008). Meanwhile, seed and agrochemical corporations reported unusual profits for 2007: Monsanto (44 percent), DuPont (19 percent), and Syngenta (28 percent) (GRAIN, 2008:4).

Agflation is an amplification of a long process of construction of a relative surplus labor force. This labor force fuels accumulation effected through webs of outsourcing across North and South, and exerting downward pressure on (social) wage expectations. Resulting labor casualization is manifest in growing public disorder as food price inflation further devalues wages, and even devastates subsistence producers who are dependent on cooking oil purchases. Thus a *New York Times* report noted:

> Governments in many poor countries have tried to respond by stepping up food subsidies, imposing or tightening price controls, restricting exports and cutting food import duties… No category of food prices has risen as quickly this winter as so-called edible oils… Cooking oil may seem a trifling expense in the West. But in the developing world, cooking oil is an important source of calories and represents one of the biggest cash outlays for poor families, which grow much of their own food but have to buy oil in which to cook it.
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> Few crops illustrate the emerging problems in the global food chain as well as palm oil, a vital commodity in much of the world and particularly Asia. From jungles and street markets in Southeast Asia to food companies in the United States and biodiesel factories in Europe, soaring prices for the oil are drawing environmentalists, energy companies, consumers, indigenous peoples and governments into acrimonious disputes (Bradsher, 2008: A9).

Not only does this report draw attention to the integration of energy and food prices, through the direct connection between oil and its palm oil substitute,[6] but also it speaks to the crisis of social reproduction associated with agflation. That is, the so-called food crisis represents the moment in which the contradictory relations of the neo-liberal food regime become visible, after a long process of dispossession, slum expansion, immiseration and underconsumption. In effect, the relationship of the food regime to the reproduction of labor power is less about a historical process of producing cheap food to reduce labor costs, and more about combining the (subsidized) assault with cheap food on small producers (predominantly women) with an assault on vulnerable consumers of wage-foods (Hansen-Kuhn 2007).

The connection between food and the reproduction of labor power, from a value relations perspective, is no longer the obvious one of provisioning labor with cheap food, for the purposes of reproduction and rule. Rather, food, in its price-form, performs a very different kind of reproduction and rule, as Vía Campesina has reminded us: "the massive movement of food around the world is forcing the increased movement of people" (2000). That is, food is artificially cheapened, not only to reduce wage costs, but also to eliminate barriers on the land to agribusiness, thereby generating a labor reserve.[7] This labor reserve itself reproduces labor power under conditions where neo-liberal policies

[6] Palm oil "now used widely in food products ranging from instant noodles to biscuits and ice cream, has become so integrated into energy markets that its price moves in tandem with crude oil prices" (Greenfield, 2007: 4).

[7] Cf Patnaik, who elaborates how and why the peasantry and the working poor have endured an "income deflation" via neoliberal policies, which deflation has rendered the social reproduction of the peasantry increasingly unviable, and explains both the stagnation in food supply over the last quarter century, and the inability to respond to agflation today with an increase in food supply – insofar as the peasantry is the "agency through which [the adoption of land-augmenting technological progress] could be introduced" (2008:113). Interestingly, he omits mention of the artificial "world price" resulting from surplus dumping.

have institutionalized a public disregard for social reproduction, rendering labor disposable. When Marx wrote that "independently of the limits of the actual increase of population, [the capitalist mode of production] creates, for the changing needs of the self-expansion of capital, a mass of human material always ready for exploitation" (1967: 632), he anticipated a targeted liberalization and privatization that "establishes an accumulation of misery, corresponding with accumulation of capital" (Ibid: 645) – cycling *disposable* generations of labor through casual jobs, who experience a pronounced under-consumption and social reproduction crisis with rising food prices.

The question of survival, under conditions of a permanent labor reserve and casualization of the wage relation, now magnifies the question of food's relationship to the reproduction of labor. There are two issues here. First, the reproduction of labor, as a relationship of rule, is threatened by rising food prices and declining real wages, as evidenced in food rebellion. Second, while the cost of food is critical to labor, the cost of labor may be less important to capital, given access to an army of casual labor in no condition to push up wages.

Arguably, through de-peasantization cycles (Araghi 1995, 2008) agribusiness (and its neo-liberalizing institutional supports) has so casualized the global wage relation that capital can pick and choose its labor force for outsourcing at will, from its global labor reserve. Having already been enlisted in the neoliberal project, governments are absorbing responsibility for rising food costs and therefore for subsidizing capital. The neoliberal compact has, however, always depended on public subsidies. Privatization rolled back food subsidies for labor under the debt regime, but the consequences of two

decades of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2003) are now materializing in rising food prices and rolling food rebellions.

State responses to rebellions include food price stabilization measures through various makeshift policies (Egyptian army baking bread) as prices rise beyond their citizen-consumers' means. Ben Ali's last act before leaving Tunisia was to lower the price of bread. It is too early to tell how this latter process will unfold in Egypt, but it intensifies the *degradation of social reproduction* – beyond the deepening reliance on women's informal labor and the general impoverishment of vulnerable classes to absorb the austerity of structural adjustment – to such an extent that urban rebellions threaten public order, such as it is.

Contemporary Food Rebellions

Over the year between mid-2007 and mid-2008, there was a 130 percent increase in the global price of maize and a 75 percent increase in the price of rice, with similar increases in prices of soybeans, corn and many other major food commodities. Overall, the aggregate global price of food doubled in real terms from 2000, and is set to increase in real terms by up to 50 percent in the next decade, according to the OECD and FAO. Yet over the last decade, income for many of the world's poorer people fell. For the lowest paid workers, income has fallen in real terms since the mid-1980s in a wide range of countries; in Haiti, for example, one of the countries hardest hit by the food price increases, by 2003 wages for menial and sweatshop jobs had plummeted to just 20 percent of their 1981 level.[8] In early 2008, the current director of the FAO, Jacques Diouf, warned of 'hunger riots' unless grain prices were lowered. He reported that 37

[8] (United Nations 2005); Economist Intelligence Unit, *Haiti: Country Profile 2003*, 24.

countries faced food crises, and that affected people "will not let themselves die without doing something. They will react." (Harsch, 2008).

There are two important dimensions to this response. First, Northern officials view the food crisis as a security issue, with food rebellions as "stark reminders that food insecurity threatens not only the hungry but peace and stability itself" (Hoyos and Blas, 2008). Second, embedded in this 'reminder' is the implicit recognition that food rebellions politicize hunger. Senegal has been a relatively stable multi-party democracy, never having experience a coup d'état. Even so, Dakar food rebels, organized by opposition parties, carried empty rice bags, tomato tins and other items, symbolizing their desire for President Wade to relinquish office (Sy, 2008), especially given his conventional response of modernizing rice production (likely to become a luxury) and yet securing a deal with India to cover Senegal's rice deficit over the next six years (Associate Press, 2008). As Ernest Harsch reported, in Senegal and in about a dozen other African countries, protesters poured into the streets as food price inflation further depleted their living conditions because "many people still feel they have little voice in influencing policy — unless they go out into the streets."

We would parse this report in several ways. First, there is an implicit point that the world is not short of food rather it is unevenly available, which in turn is a political-economic question.[9] States are clearly identified as responsible for immiseration and underconsumption, but at the same time as lacking democratic structures, even beyond

[9] Note that Joachim von Braun, director of the International Food Policy Research Institute, warned: "Demand is running away. The world has been consuming more than it produces for five years now. Stocks of grain – of rice, wheat and maize – are down at levels not seen since the early 80s" (quoted in Watts, 2007). What he may have meant is that grain reserves have been depleted (commercialized), not by rising demand so much as by political fiat. According to the FAO, with record grain harvests in 2007, food supply was 1.5 times current demand, and, while world food production has risen about 2 percent a year over the last twenty years, world population growth rate has fallen to 1.14 percent a year (Holt-Giménez 2008: 5).

electoral systems. Governments are quick to locate their shortcomings as the result of external forces beyond their control. The development literature to date has conflated these relationships into a single concept, of the 'IMF riot.' While this was intended to be shorthand for a more complex concatenation of events and relationships, it is important to distinguish these relationships, and in this article we hope to bring appropriate evidence to bear. Second, "ordinary Africans" refers to laborers, the working poor, and the unemployed whose ranks are continually rising as urbanization outstrips industrialization – indeed 'Africa's slums are growing at twice the speed of the continent's exploding cities' (Davis, 2006: 18). And third, our overall point is that the food rebellion 'event' is in varied ways a direct challenge to local and national political relations, and an indirect politicization of the policies and power relations underlying the neo-liberal rhetoric of 'food security,' which has been institutionalized as a method of food provisioning through the world market by transnational firms trading agro-industrial commodities produced under near-monopoly conditions (McMichael 2003). It is important to observe the poetics of 'security' in 'food security', conjuring as it does the spectre of order and force. To restate, the irony here is that the development project was premised on the eradication of 'food insecurity' understood as the emergence of political demands for control over the means of production. Mere hunger, remember, was happily tolerated by the bourgeoisie – it was when those protests took to public space, or plausibly threatened to, that change emerged. Yet because of the contradictions inherent within the food system, the accelerations of capital, the detachment of use and exchange values, the need to accumulate by dispossession, and the need to remove impediments to profitability that simultaneously allow reproductive labor, the modern food system has eaten itself out of a

home. It has become the architect not of a solution to 'food insecurity', but to an edifice that makes poverty and hunger more likely.

Yet, again, mere exposure to high prices through re-worked market forces is not sufficient to invoke rebellion – this is why the 'IMF' moniker is unsatisfactory. Poverty may lead to hunger, but not necessarily to protest. The world's poorest areas are rural, not urban, and if there were some automatic connection between poverty and protest, large parts of the rural world would be in flames. Rebellions express something other, or more, than the depth of poverty. Following Thompson's work, two relationships appear central. The first is a sudden and severe entitlement gap, a gap between what people believe their entitlement and what they can in fact achieve. Food inflation has meant that people believe they ought to be able to feed their families at a certain level, which is significantly lowered when food inflation hits. Consider the case of Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere, where three quarters of the population lives on less than two dollars a day. Haiti has, of course, suffered centuries of intervention and installation of neo-colonial regimes. The fact that Haiti produced more rice in 1984 than it does now is no accident, nor is the fact that the bags of rice to be found in Haiti have US flags stamped on them. The reversal of food sourcing is one key component of what Paul Farmer (an advocate for Haitian justice) calls 'structural violence,' the impact of global power inequality. Some claim the first reversal in food relations began with USAID eradication of the pig population in Haiti, in response to a swine fever outbreak. Pigs represented peasants' 'savings accounts,' and this action contributed to President Duvalier's replacement in 1986 by a military junta, backed by the U.S., and ushering in a neoliberal project of currency devaluation, trade liberalization, and opening Haiti's

agricultural markets to U.S. producers. In the early 1990s, the U.S. introduced food aid, via PL-480, undercutting peasant production with heavily subsidized U.S. rice, and completing the process of instituting food dependency in the guise of 'food security'. In Haiti today, as elsewhere, dirt cookies (a concoction of mud, salt, sugar and oil) became the new 'level.' The existence and spread of this entitlement expectation gap is one substantial contribution to food rebellions.

The second trigger is that rebellions tend to occur where citizens have no voice or power to gain the ear of the government. This is a sign, in other words, that democratic politics has been exhausted. Haiti has long been beset by political instability, and now has a US president - René Préval – installed. That instability has been compounded by a further factor – inequality. As Schuller (2008) reported:

> Missing from most media accounts is that while Haiti is the "poorest country in the hemisphere" by economic measures—80% live on less than US$2 per day, and around half have an income of $1 or less—it is also the most unequal. It is second only to Namibia in income inequality, and has the most millionaires per capita in the region. Margarethe Thenusla, a 34-year old factory worker and mother of two said, "When they ask for aid for the needy, you hear that they release thousands of dollars for aid in Haiti. But when it comes you can't see anything that they did with the food aid. You see it in the market, they're selling it. Us poor people don't see it."

Again, inequality isn't new to Haiti – it has consistently had one of the highest Gini coefficients in the World Bank's World Development Indicator database.

Nonetheless, with the price increases, rebellions broke out in April, 2008, in Les Cayes, with five people killed in street battles with police and UN troops. This uprising ignited protests in the capital, Port-au-Prince, and in other parts of Haiti, prompting the Senate to fire the Prime Minister, Edouard Alexis. One demonstrator put it this way: “Political parties and lawmakers are fighting over who should control the next cabinet. But they don't seem to care for the population that is starving” (Delva, 2008). Schuller.found similar sentiments echoed by protesters in Port-au-Prince. One, named Linda, “asked pointedly, ‘Did the cost of living go up for the government? Because the people, we are suffering and the government isn't. They act like the cost of living hasn't gone up.’ Lindsay quoted the demands of Cavaillon community organizer Frantz Thelusma, ‘First, we demand the government get rid of its neoliberal plan. We will not accept this death plan. Second, the government needs to regulate the market and lower the price of basic goods.’” (2008). In addition, then, to the sudden fluctuation and the entitlement gap, a further factor, both cause and consequence of the neoliberal food system, presents itself. At the same time as the current food regime has immiserated many, it has enriched a few. Were hardship to be equally distributed through the economy (think of stories of national solidarity on the home front in the Second World War, for instance) one might imagine that protest could be avoided. But the existence of a neoliberal political caste, that group of people who, despite hardship are able to continue their conspicuous consumption, can provide an obvious focus for political dissatisfaction (Veblen 1973). In order for this contradiction to be maintained, the dominant bloc so insulates itself from engagement with the public that there are no means by which the poor can effectively articulate their political dissatisfaction. Again, in Haiti, there were widespread reports of disengagement

by the political class. Indeed, as Schuller notes, the aloof quality of the Préval administration might have contributed to its longevity:

> behind closed doors people from all classes I spoke with—day laborers, street vendors, factory workers, NGO employees, and other middle-class professionals—complained about his apparent lack of leadership and unwillingness to address the public. To many observers, while his relative silence may have contributed to keeping his "unity government" together, government inaction led to the return of violence and *lavi chè* [high cost of living]. (Schuller 2008)

It was the combination of inequality and disenfranchisement, combined with a sudden entitlement gap, that summoned forth the moral economy in which continued disengagement by Préval became grounds for protest. These dynamics are not those of Haiti alone. Egypt presents another case in which we might observe the necessary conditions that anticipate food rebellions. Earlier this year, Joel Beinin (2008) reported:

> Between 2005 and 2008 food prices rose by 33% for meat and as much as 146% for chicken, and this March inflation reached 15.8%. Severe shortages of subsidised bread, the main source of calories for most Egyptians, have made things worse – low-paid government inspectors often sell subsidised flour on the black market. Rows in long bread lines caused injuries and even deaths. The cost of unsubsidised bread has nearly doubled in the past two years.
>
> In context of a broadening social movement, with unprecedented strikes and collective action since 2004, spreading across private and public sectors, in April 2008 security officers thwarted a strike planned by workers at the Misr Spinning and Weaving plant in the textile town of Mahalla el-Kobra to protest increased prices of food, mostly bread, and to demand a rise in the minimum wage. Though the strike was called off,

some workers took to the streets in peaceful protest, upon which security officers fired tear gas into the crowd and beat protestors with batons. Protestors responded by burning banners of ruling National Democratic Party candidates for the upcoming municipal elections. Further protests, with several thousand people, let to the defacing of a large poster of President Mubarak, which was followed by over 300 arrests, and a firefight resulting in nine people critically wounded, and a 15-year old boy shot to death, while watching from the balcony of his family's flat (Beinin, 2008). The call for a general strike following the Mahalla intifada was endorsed by the Egyptian Movement for Change - Kifaya, the Islamist Labour Party, the Nasserist Karama Party, and the Bar Association. But with the mass arrest of almost 100 political activists, the plan was abandoned (Beinin, 2008). Nevertheless, el-Hanaklawy (2008) suggests:

> These strikes will continue because the economic conditions that sparked them still exist. And the strikes are not just about bread and butter issues. They include a great level of political sophistication. When you strike in a dictatorship, against state owned management, you know you will be confronted by state backed trade unions, that your factory will be surrounded by state security troops who might kill or kidnap you afterwards, and torture you or abuse your family. So to strike at all is a political decision. But you can see the economic consciousness turning into political consciousness. Mahalla strikers carried banners saying "Down with the government", while chanting against the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Compare this with a report in *The New York Times* (Slackman, 2008:A6):

> …what has turned the demands of individual workers into a potential mass movement, officials and political analysts said, has been inflation of food prices, mostly bread and cooking oil. The rising cost of wheat, coupled with widespread corruption in the production and distribution of subsidized bread in Egypt, has prompted the government to resolve the problem. "People in Egypt don't care about democracy and the transfer of power" [Belal Fadl, a script writer and satirist in Cairo] said. "They don't believe in it because they didn't grow up with it in the first place… Their problem is limited to their ability to survive, and if that is threatened then they will stand up."

The lesson here is that food rebellions express elemental struggles around the conditions of social reproduction, but those conditions can be easily politicized, and have been. The precise contours of that politicization cannot be discovered *a priori*. We suggest that the reaching for modes of politics that offer popular control over food policy and, indeed, the wider economy, are moments in which those disenfranchised by the food regime seek to become sovereign. The notion of food sovereignty speaks to this rather directly. We are not, however, suggesting that the demand for control and rights over food and food policy actually leads to the fulfillment of those rights. The eruption of protest is a sign of the hegemonic crisis of a food regime, but there is no progressive teleology in describing the protests as moments food sovereignty. Consider, finally, an example of food rebellions not in the Global South, but the Global North.

The European Union is the world's second largest importer of wheat, and therefore one might expect its members to have suffered from the high price of wheat.

Yet food rebellions have only happened in one country – Italy. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, Italians consume more wheat than any other country in the European Union (414g/person/day). This stylized fact prompts the question about whether Italians' higher consumer exposure to wheat price rises than the rest of Europe led to protest. While a tantalising possible explanation, it cannot do: the quantity consumed by Italians is less than, say, Syria (416g/person/day) and only a little more than Armenia (400g/person/day). Average income in both countries is substantially less than Italy, meaning that a price rise would have meant a proportionally higher portion of household budgets being diverted to wheat consumption, yet while governments in both countries were concerned at the price rises, neither of these countries experienced a protest.

Italy at the time of the pasta protests, the center-left Prodi government was in the final throes of its brief tenure. A deep analysis of the situation in that country is beyond the scope of this paper (though see (Ginsborg 2005) for important insight into contemporary Italian political economy). But in stylised form, the facts of the Italian food rebellions look similar to those in Egypt or Haiti – they represent a rebellion against both the high price of food, and a political class that has proven itself unable to convince the demos of its ability to assure 'food security', and indeed (as the publishing sensation of 'The Caste' (Rizzo and Stella 2007) suggests) of a class utterly unable to convince the demos of its sensitivity to the concerns of working families. Partly as a result of these protests, the Prodi government fell, and elections were held in which a coalition headed by Silvio Berlusconi won power.

The answer to the call for peoples' food sovereignty turned out to be the brazen return of corporate power under the guise of *national* sovereignty. Street protests for food sovereignty don't automatically result in that sovereignty – the political rupture occasioned by food rebellions is an always-contested space, from which resultant political configurations appear as a matter of political contingency, not necessity (see, of course, (Marx 1964) for the clearest example of this analytic). This realization is important lest the widespread emergence of food sovereignty protests be interpreted as a sufficient harbinger of a transformation in food system politics.

Conclusion

We have argued that, under the aegis of preventing urban disturbance, the development project was geared to assuring food supplies as a matter of national and geopolitical security. The shifting geopolitical configuration toward the end of the twentieth century spawned the disciplines of structural adjustment. Under their rule, governments have rolled back state-based entitlements, particularly in the domain of social welfare. There has been, as a result of the economic contradictions within the neoliberal food regime, a degradation of social reproduction. In particular, there has been an erosion of entitlements like access to education, healthcare, and basic needs, are not eroded uniformly (Tilly 1983).

The food system also produced a structurally unsound economic system that communicated price fluctuations far more directly into the heart of poor communities. The disproportionate burden borne by the poor, and poor women in particular, has resulted in political organising. This has been central to the increasing incidence of food

rebellions (Daines and Seddon 1994). E. P. Thompson's theories of moral economy continue to be useful in explaining these phenomena. Again, the incidence of protest is not correlated to material indicators of deprivation, but to the gap between expected and actual entitlements, and the available repertoire of forms of protest. Pre-existing political organising, whether in unions, Islamic brotherhoods, churches or housewives' clubs, raises expectations, and expands the repertoire of protest. Insofar as these political spaces offer sovereignty, we interpret food rebellions as a consequence of the development paradigm of 'food security', and a cry for 'food sovereignty'. We are not, however, so naïve as to mistake the demand for sovereignty over the food system for that sovereignty itself. The current neoliberal order is maintained through active hegemony. Indeed, Gramsci's notion of hegemony was forged in circumstances in which cries for sovereignty were channelled not into the socialism which he advocated, but the fascism that imprisoned him. Neoliberal hegemony is not to be under-estimated, even though its contradictions are becoming everyday more acute. We imagine that there will be many more food rebellions yet to come, as this hegemony is transformed. It seems as if the food rebellion is not quite yet ready to for the dustbin of history.

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