A Political Economy of the Food Riot[*]

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In 2007 and 2008, the world witnessed the return of one of the oldest forms of collective action, the food riot. 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 riots were reported included Uzbekistan, Morocco, Guinea, Mauritania, Senegal, India, 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 & Seddon, 1994), and which were likewise linked to steep price rises for urban 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 between 1983 and 1985. 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 politi-

[*] We are indebted to Mindi Schneider (2008) for her excellent research support.

cal 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."

We question such terminology, in that it suggests that the ire of the crowds was directed exclusively at a Bretton Woods institution rather than at a suite of context-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 & 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 this article, 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 the 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, questions 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). In 1986, then-U.S. Secretary for Agriculture, John Block, said 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 U.S. agricultural products, which are

available, in most cases, at much lower cost" (quoted in Schaeffer, 1995: 268). The ultimate mechanism for compliance with the demands of food security was the free market, as instituted through the development project (McMichael, 2003). It is no small irony, then, that food riots are the consequence of a set of policies licensed by the supposed virtues of food security.

Our argument is that the food riot 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 riot 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 rioting often registers a long process leading up to a signal crisis, a process of structural deprivation and erosion of entitlement (cf., George, 1977). Food riots 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 riots 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 riots may stem from the political-economy of food security, the protests themselves are agential moments that can, in some cases, be understood as a movement toward an alternative best captured in the term "food sovereignty." Food sovereignty was a term generated by the Vía 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 riots, we argue, can be just such moments. Such protests are not always and necessarily expressions of food sovereignty, insofar as their outcome may not be what its constituents may wish for. But whether or not the level of democratic control over the food system increases as a result of the protests, the spread of food riots invariably has much to do with a specific kind of rebellion against the political economy of neoliberalism, as expressed in local and national settings.

FOOD RIOTING IN HISTORY

The phenomenon of people taking to the streets to protest hunger has a very long history. Cicero (106–43 BC) witnessed it 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 riots 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 riots to the idea of moral economy, Louise Tilly (1971) points to two key features spawning food protest. First, she suggests that the formation of a national market in grain eroded the kinds of local control over the economy that peasants and the urban poor were able to exercise in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Secondly, the French government's withdrawal from strong market regulation and price-setting ended the varieties of paternalism and *noblesse oblige* on which large swaths 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 preceding, and in the fifty years after, the French Revolution. Food riots continued in France well into the 1850's. 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 violent. 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) become 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 rioting. At the end of the First World War, a number of instances of food riots registered particularly in North America. Food riots 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. Given the general spread of this suffering, however, a further cause is needed to explain 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) organizations and, second, the majority of participants and organizers were women. The idea of a moral economy works well here. In its original formulation, the idea of a moral economy pointed to the distance between the traditional paternal modes of support for social reproduction, and the arrangements for the poor under the new capitalist order. The protests that emerge point to the rupture between the expectation of order under one regime, and that of order in another. This logic can be applied to the case of the food riots in early twentieth-century America. The gap between expectations and reality were fuelled, on the one hand, by food price inflation, which made food less attainable, and

on the other by revolutionary organizing that suggested an economic logic at variance with capitalism. There were, furthermore, no ready alternative means for women to register their protest. In the United States, the nineteenth amendment to the constitution, recognizing 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 riots were also a means through which organizing 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 labor 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 riots.

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 use of the term "riot" problematic, 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, which is confirmed by Davis' research on the synchronized El Niño famines across India, China, and Brazil in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (2001), referred to in the introduction to this journal issue. 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 CORPORATE, FOOD REGIMES

Decolonization movements, and the ever-present threat of food rioting, was a central justification for the mid-twentieth century project of "development," elaborated in powerful corridors of Washington, London, and Paris after the Second World War, and at the Bretton Woods conference of 1944, where the World Bank and the IMF were created. This was the age of "hunger amidst scarcity" (Araghi, 2000), and development discourses formed around the problem of Third World poverty and hunger 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" (quoted in Saldaña-Portillo, 2003: 22).

The vision of "feeding the world" emerged through 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 1940's, 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 (see Jarosz in this issue).

The overrule by President Truman of the proposal for a World Food Board by the FAO and the U.N. Relief and Rehabilitation Administration signaled the significance of the food weapon via bilateral U.S. aid programs. The U.S. food aid, or development, regime, formalized in 1954 as Public Law-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 geopolitical frontline, and to 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 regions of the Third World that were being industrialized, at the same time as its low-priced cereals undermined local farmers (Friedmann, 1982, 1987). The managed construction of the 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.

Postcolonial 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 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%, and now 63% of the world's urban population dwells in, and on the margins of, sprawling cities of the global South (Davis, 2006).

Commercial monocropping 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. Postwar 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 United States, 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 export beef and by 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.

These mechanisms, together, form the corporate food regime: an ordering of the world food economy that combines state power, the price weapon, and corporate sourcing strategies (McMichael,

2005). The WTO's Agreement on Agriculture outlawed artificial price support through 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, which were dumped in Southern markets. Prices for the major commodities in world trade have fallen 30% or more since 1994, and were at an all-time low for the last century and a half by 1999 (Ritchie, 1999; *The Economist,* 1999: 75).

The price weapon is enabled by a WTO rule that eliminates 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. 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 1990's, food deficit states experienced a 20% rise in food bills, despite record low prices (Murphy, 1999: 3), and since the postwar "development era," Africa has moved from food self-reliance to importing 25% of its food needs (Holt-Giménez, 2008). 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 United States 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 corporate food 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." Across the world, 20–30 million people have lost their land under the impact of trade liberalization and export agriculture (Madeley, 2000: 75), and this process is currently intensifying through state-sanctioned corporate "energy and food security" land grabs (GRAIN, 2007).

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 neoliberalism, 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 promoted export agriculture and replaced state marketing boards with private buyers. Producers were at the mercy of speculators. This fundamental contradiction, whereby "free markets" exclude and/or starve populations dispossessed by their very implementation, characterizes the corporate food regime and is, as we argue below, the source of today's food riots. 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).

AGFLATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Having outlined the origins and political economy of the food system in which the most recent riots have occurred, we now move 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 acknowledge what we might call the "neoliberal climax": the conjunction of crises of labor, energy, and finance. Contributing to the 2007–08 period of agflation, a rapid switch of agribusiness into biofuels (aided by subsidies and short-term politics of the energy/climate crisis) and of investors into commodity futures (for want of more secure investments) fueled the spike in food prices (Bertholet, 2008; Holt-Giménez & Kenfield, 2008). As one reporter from Mozambique noted:

> From the savannahs of west Africa to the rainforests of Congo, the plains of Tanzania and the wilderness of Ethiopia, governments are handing over huge tracts of fertile land to private companies aiming to convert biomass grown on large plantations into liquid fuels for export markets. African leaders like Senegal's Abdoulaye Wade are predicting a "green revolution" and looking eagerly to lucrative exports (Howden, 2008: 34).

The "food crisis" also registers a long process of construction of a relative surplus labor force, which was dispossessed by the aforementioned crisis of low prices. This labor force has fueled accumulation effected through webs of outsourcing across North and South, which have exerted downward pressure on (social) wage expectations. The resulting casualization of labor has rendered the working poor vulnerable to food price increases, and 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.

> 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, but also it speaks to the crisis of social reproduction associated with agflation. That is, the "food crisis" represents the moment in which the contradictory relations of the 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).

More than the question of cheapening labor costs is then the question of social reproduction on the margins of capitalist economy. As Vía Campesina noted during the crisis of low prices: "the massive movement of food around the world is forcing the increased movement of people" (2000). The cheapening of food to reduce wage costs also, through cycles of dispossession, generates a labor reserve.[1] Thus neoliberal policies institutionalized a public disregard for social reproduction at large, at the same time as capital has cycled *disposable* generations of labor through casualized, flexible, and runaway jobs. This is the historic basis for undercon-

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[1] 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).

sumption and a social reproduction crisis, now exacerbated by rising food prices.

Having already been enlisted in the neoliberal project, governments are absorbing responsibility for rising food costs and therefore for subsidizing capital. 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 riots. State responses to riots include food price stabilization measures through various makeshift policies (e.g., Egyptian army baking bread) as prices rise beyond their citizen-consumers' means. It is too early to tell how this latter process will unfold,[2] 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 RIOTS

Over the year between mid-2007 and mid-2008, there was a 130% increase in the global price of maize and a 75% 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% 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-1980's 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% of their 1981 level (United Nations, 2005; Economist Intelligence Unit, *Haiti: Country Profile 2003*: 24). In early 2008, the current director of the FAO, Jacques Diouf, warned of "hunger riots" unless grain prices were lowered. He reported that 37 countries faced food crises, and that affected

[2] As of April 2009, global food prices remain 25% above average prices prior to the 2008 spike.

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 riots as "stark reminders that food insecurity threatens not only the hungry but peace and stability itself" (Hoyos & Blas, 2008: 2). Secondly, embedded in this "reminder" is the implicit recognition that food riots politicize hunger. Senegal has been a relatively stable multi-party democracy, never having experienced a coup d'état. Even so, Dakar food rioters, organized by opposition parties, unions, and civil society groups, carried empty rice bags, tomato tins and other items, symbolizing their desire for President Wade to relinquish office (Sy, 2008; Harsch, 2008). As 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" (Harsch, 2008).

In Dakar, food inflation added to rising prices of transport, electricity, and other essentials. The combination of rising food and fuel prices was routinely attributed to the international trade system by rulers besieged by anti-government demonstrations—from Maputo, Mozambique, where bread and bus fare rises sparked protest in February 2008, through three cities in Burkina Faso, where food prices and state taxation were the object of urban protests, to Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, where 1500 demonstrated against food and general cost of living increases, underlined by rising fuel prices. As Ernest Harsch reports: "In most demonstrations, protesters have expressed anger not only over high food and fuel prices, but also towards the governments they hold responsible. The linking of political and economic grievances has been most evident where the same presidents and ruling parties have been in power for many years" (2008). While Senegal's President Wade declared in April, 2008, "There is no hunger in Senegal and there will be no hunger in Senegal," the *Daily Nation* reported: "President Wade was elected on the promise that he would improve the living conditions that seriously deteriorated in the 80's and 90's" (Sy, 2008). In addition, in the middle of the food crisis, Wade's embrace of the conversion of Africa to a "Green Opec" through the wide-scale planting of crops not for food but for fuel, through "biofuels," prompted calls

for a moratorium on what Nigerian Nnimmo Bassey of the African Biodiversity Network views as "a flashback to colonial plantations." An alliance of African civil society groups claims: "We need to protect food security, forests, water, land rights, farmers and indigenous peoples from the aggressive march of agrofuel developments" (quoted in Howden, 2008).

Across the African continent, it appears that food inflation is the fuse to a combustible "awakening of the people's conscience," as claimed by the secretary-general of Guinea's National Confederation of Workers. Thus, not only is the food riot one of the oldest forms of collective action, it is also the moment in which economic and political injustice reaches a tipping point—arguably because food is the most elemental material symbol of the social contract. The measure of this is the rapid repression meted out by governments, responding with force against the protesters. In Burkina Faso, hundreds were arrested and sentenced, in Cameroon, 40 people died and at least 1500 were arrested, 100 were injured in Egypt and about 250 arrested, and in Senegal, Cameroon, and Morocco, journalists were beaten and governments shut down media outlets. Nevertheless, in the same countries, as well as in Guinea and Mauritania, the same governments steadied prices and "initiated consultations with trade unions, merchants' associations and consumers' organizations" (Harsch, 2008). In other words, the moment of conflagration stimulated recognition of the "moral economy" underlying food provisioning, a moral economy asserted by collective action at the same time as it informs the technologies of rule.

As a technology of rule, food provisioning serves as a lightning rod of contention over perceptions of just governance. We make three observations on the FAO director's warning of hunger riots over grain prices. First 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.[3] States are clearly identified by rioters as responsible for immiseration and underconsumption, but at the

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[3] 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 80's" (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

same time as lacking democratic structures, even beyond electoral systems. Governments are quick to attribute their shortcomings to external forces beyond their control. The development literature to date has conflated these relationships into a single concept, 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. Secondly, the people rioting are laborers, the working poor, and the unemployed, whose ranks are continually rising as urbanization outstrips industrialization—indeed in Africa "slums are growing at twice the speed of the continent's exploding cities" (Davis, 2006: 18). And thirdly, our overall point is that food rioting 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 neoliberal rhetoric of "food security," 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 specter 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, recall, was happily tolerated by ruling classes—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 allowed the reproduction of 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 rioting—this is why the "IMF riot" 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

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about 2% a year over the last twenty years, world population growth rate has fallen to 1.14% a year (Holt-Giménez, 2008: 5).

poverty and protest, large parts of the rural world would be in flames. Riots 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 to be 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 neocolonial 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 U.S. 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 1990's, the U.S. introduced food aid, via PL-480, which undercut peasant production with heavily subsidized U.S. rice, and completed 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 riots.

The second trigger is that riots tend to occur where citizens have no voice or power to gain the ear of the government. This is a sign, in other words, of the conjunction of food inflation and autocracy or the exhaustion of democratic politics. Haiti has long been beset by political instability, and now has a U.S.-backed president—René Préval—installed. This 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 meas-

> ures—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, riots broke out in April, 2008, in Les Cayes, with five people killed in street battles with police and U.N. 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' . . . [quoting] 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'" (Schuller, 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 immiserates 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 (cf., 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 (2008) notes, the aloof quality of the Préval administration might have contributed to its longevity:

> [B]ehind 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 a* [high cost of living].

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 riots. Thus 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 an increase 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 protesters with batons. Protesters re-

sponded by burning banners of ruling National Democratic Party candidates for the upcoming municipal elections. Further protests, with several thousand people, led to the defacing of a large poster of President Mubarak, which was followed by over 300 arrests, and a firefight that resulted 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-Hamalawy (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:*

> [W]hat 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" (Slackman, 2008: A6).

The lesson here is that food riots express elemental struggles around the conditions of social reproduction, but those conditions are always political. 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. Mexico is a prime example, with scattered protests across the country as corn and beans, sugar and milk import protections ended on January 1, 2008, under the NAFTA. *Campesinos* blocked a border crossing, carrying signs reading "Without Corn There Is No Country" (Tobar, 2008). Thousands of *campesinos* converged on Mexico City on January 31, 2008, demanding renegotiation of the treaty to protect corn and beans. One of the leaders of the Mexican peasant movement declared: "The free trade agreement is like an open wound for the Mexican countryside. You can give the patient medical attention but if you don't stop the hemorrhaging first, the patient dies" (quoted in Rosenberg, 2008). The Mexican government's response, with price caps, food subsidies, and encouragement of urban agriculture, however limited, mirrors the food sovereignty claims from the demonstrators.

In Peru, where on April 30, more than 1,000 women (who run food kitchens for the poor) protested the government's response to rising food prices outside of Peru's Congress (Arce & Wade, 2008), two months later the protests escalated to address root causes of food inflation in neoliberal policies. On July 9, about 30,000 members of the General Confederation of Workers joined a nationwide protest against rising food prices. In Lima, 6,000 people banged pots in protest in a central plaza. Protesters also set fire to a government building in Puerto Maldonado. The General Confederation of Workers, the umbrella union in Peru, argued that food price hikes were the result of free-market policies adopted by President Alan Garcia (Salazar, 2008).

The notion of food sovereignty speaks to these protests 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 of food sovereignty.

Consider, finally, an example of food riots 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 riots 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 whether Italians' higher consumer exposure to wheat price increases than the rest of Europe led to protest. While a tantalizing 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 would be diverted to wheat consumption, yet while governments in both countries were concerned at the price increases, neither of these countries experienced a protest.

In 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 article (see Ginsborg [2005] for important insight into contemporary Italian political economy). But in stylized form, the facts of the Italian food riots 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" suggests (Rizzo & Stella, 2007), 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 peoples' call for food sovereignty turned out to be the brazen return of corporate power under the guise of *national* sovereignty. Street protests for food sovereignty do not automatically result in that sovereignty—the political rupture occasioned by food riots 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, including support for smallholder agriculture on which much of the Southern population depends. 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, even if they 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 by poor women in particular, has resulted in political organizing. This has been central to the increasing incidence of food riots (Daines & Seddon, 1994). E. P. Thompson's concept of moral economy continues 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 organizing, 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 riots 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 underestimated, even though its contradictions are becoming everyday more acute. We imagine that there will be many more food riots yet to come, as this hegemony is transformed. It appears that the food riot is not quite yet ready for the dustbin of history.

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