Food Sovereignty and the Possibilities for an Equitable, Just and Sustainable Food System

Ann E. Bartos

Abstract The concepts of food security and food sovereignty help explain some of the problems associated with the global economy and global agricultural production. However, these concepts are expressed differently due to the specific economic, social, political, and environmental geographies in which they exist. Any locale around the globe will face challenges in implementing and ensuring food security and food sovereignty due to a variety of issues including the changing nature of land usage, the ever-expanding commodity chains of agricultural products, the trends and whims of the global consumer, and accessibility of healthy and adequate resources for the entire population. This chapter addresses the specific challenges that one particular locale, Aotearoa New Zealand, needs to negotiate in order to achieve a more secure and sovereign food landscape. Challenges include socioeconomic disparity, cultural appropriateness, and domestic agricultural self-sufficiency, all of which are further troubled by discourses of a "pure" Aotearoa New Zealand.

The complicated nature of food and eating in the 21st century is a crucial area of academic inquiry, provides consumers with too much and not enough choice, and stimulates a variety of social movements near and far from where food is produced. Such concerns have historically been raised through both academic and development discourses and frequently through the lens of food security: "when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life" (articulated at the World Food Summit of 1996). Originally coined in the mid-1970s as a reaction against an international food crisis, food security

A.E. Bartos (✉)
School of Environment, The University of Auckland,
Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand
e-mail: a.bartos@auckland.ac.nz

quickly became an important and pervasive issue across the developing world. The problem was seen as related to both a lack of available food and a lack of purchasing power; short-term solutions included increasing production of export-oriented crops and increasing the reliance on food aid. Such an approach did, in fact, reduce hunger in some locations, but hunger is still a prominent global issue that has grown since the 1970s at alarming rates and remains a dire issue in the most recent *State of Food Insecurity in the World 2015* UN report (http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4646e.pdf). Governments, NGOs, charities, activists, and ordinary citizens around the world remain challenged by what seems an uphill battle to bring their communities secure and ample food supplies.

Critics of a food security approach to reducing hunger draw attention to the resultant social, economic, and political impacts of a development approach that favors exports and a cash economy. One specific critique and alternative to a food security approach arose during the 1990s while the developing world was undergoing major economic restructuring under the guise of neoliberalization. Attributed to La Via Campesina, or "The Peasants' Way," the concept of food *sovereignty* became an impassioned global social movement to redress some of the problems that resulted from neoliberal food security approaches to reducing hunger. Some of the basic tenets of a food sovereignty approach include the argument that food is a basic human right, that people should be free to produce culturally appropriate food that preserves plant and diet biodiversity, and that food production should be largely intended for domestic consumption and self-sufficiency. Food sovereignty approaches to reducing hunger have become popular in the recent past and currently inspire a variety of grassroots social movements throughout the developed world as well (for more discussion on the distinction between food sovereignty and food security, see Jarosz 2014).

Scholars and activists alike believe that incorporating a food sovereignty approach to hunger reduction has the potential to lead to positive economic, political and social transformations. However, others argue that food sovereignty is a more complicated issue than most advocates are willing to admit and requires a critical investigation of its underlying premises (e.g., Edelman 2014). Moreover, food security and food sovereignty are concepts that have legs; they travel farther and wider than where they were originally anchored. But the particularities of how these concepts take shape or the potential they carry with them in various geographies remain hidden and largely ignored. Rather than trying to adopt vague and perhaps outdated definitions of concepts that proliferate throughout academic and popular literature, there is a growing need to explore how these concepts get reconfigured in light of a particular *somewhere's* unique social, cultural, political, and environmental geography. In the remainder of this essay, I will discuss some such complications within Aotearoa New Zealand[1] as a way to demonstrate that

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[1]It is common for academic literature to cite both the indigenous and settler term for the country: Aotearoa New Zealand. The combination of the two terms draws attention to the contentiousness of colonial histories and the resulting multiple ethnicities and identities prevalent throughout the country today.

food security and food sovereignty are not just ideas but present specific challenges for their adoption based on the very geographies where they are located.

To begin, in order to better understand Aotearoa New Zealand's relationship to food and eating, it is important to explore the pervasive reliance on a particular geographical imaginary of the country that perpetuates a myth of environmental paradise. A relatively small and isolated island nation, the photogenic countryside has been an important feature of Tourism NZ's "100 % Pure New Zealand" marketing campaign since 1999. Utilized to attract backpackers, retirees and immigrants primarily from India, China and the UK, the Pure brand inspires adventure and settlement amongst the rolling green paddocks, the imposing mountain glaciers, or the seemingly endless miles of coastline. Evolving over time to include the Academy Award winning Peter Jackson Tolkien films, the current "100 % Middle Earth" campaign continues to increase tourism revenue making it a significant contributor to the country's GDP and "one of the world's most well-respected tourism brands" (Tourism NZ, n.d.).

The concept of purity suggests both freedom from environmental contamination and also correlates to ideas of morality and virtuousness. While the brand may have allured unsuspecting travelers and immigrants to settle in an unspoiled beautiful geographical location, it also does important work for food politics within the country. By strongly relying on and employing the purity discourse to smooth over any contradictions or evidence of an *impure* Aotearoa New Zealand, the resultant geographical imaginations harbor immense power. Arguably, this power is reflected in the country's food politics and perpetuates ideas that food in Aotearoa New Zealand is plentiful, apolitical, local, and environmentally sound. Such a perspective makes it difficult for the ordinary eater to unpack larger issues around food security and even more challenging to conceptualize a food sovereign Aotearoa New Zealand. To elucidate this challenge, I highlight the implications of the purity discourse in relation to three basic premises of food security and food sovereignty.

The first basic premise is that a food secure and sovereign nation should have plenty of food for all its citizens; this food should be safe, sufficient, and nutritious. While most people in Aotearoa New Zealand are able to purchase enough food to feed their families, there is also a growing population of people who do not have the financial resources to consume enough or healthy food. Across the Minority World, obesity rates are often used to demonstrate people's precarious opportunities for eating well (c.f. Guthman 2011). Aotearoa New Zealand is proving to be no different from these other countries with an obesity rate of 31 %, or almost one in three (Ministry of Health 2014/2015). However, this rate is unequally distributed and Maori and Pacific populations are much more likely to be obese than other populations at 47 and 66 % of adults respectively (ibid.). Furthermore, adults who live in areas of high socioeconomic deprivation are more likely to be obese and overweight (Ministry of Health 2015). The Ministry of Health suggests that this rise is due to changes in our food environment including the promotion of inexpensive, high caloric, and nutrient poor foods (ibid.). It is also suggested that people spend less time engaging in physical activity, which would help keep them at healthier weight levels (ibid.).

These disparities, however, are hidden within the purity discourse. As the purity discourse focuses almost exclusively on environmental beauty, it largely silences social and cultural realities of a highly diverse population and the social inequality associated with such diversity. For example, the country is comprised of 15 % Maori and has the largest Pacific population in the world at 7 %. Furthermore, Aotearoa New Zealand's population is growing due to immigration mostly from Asian countries (Statistics New Zealand 2015). Environments that are highly diverse, such as Aotearoa New Zealand, need to take issues of diversity seriously: in the case of Aotearoa New Zealand, such diversity pay attention to the ways that diversity and inequality are interlinked; within the political food landscape, the linkages between diversity and inequality often result in some people being food secure while others are not. Furthermore, in acknowledging that food insecurity is not only about having enough food but also about having healthy and affordable food, a food secure Aotearoa New Zealand would need to significantly take into consideration the quality and accessibility of available food so that all people, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic opportunities, have the same opportunities to eat well and live healthfully.

Secondly, one of the most common underlying premises of food sovereignty is that food should be culturally appropriate. With such a diverse population, deciding cultural appropriateness is challenging. Not only is there a problem about what exactly is culturally appropriate, but perhaps more challenging is determining who decides. In Aotearoa New Zealand, for example, the challenge of cultural appropriateness is evident in the supermarket landscape. While there are several fresh produce and specialty shops throughout the main urban areas catering to niche consumers such as particular immigrant communities, two supermarket companies dominate the market share. Such a duopoly results in a variety of political realities that consumers face on a daily basis including the displacement of a more diverse food landscape represented by local ownership, and the exploitation of workers in both the consumption and production ends of the supermarkets' ever lengthening commodity chains. However, low prices and the speciousness of "choice" do the important work of placating the consumer to keep such unpalatable politics hidden and uncontentious (Dixon and Isaacs 2013). In our modern society, supermarkets may in fact be the most culturally appropriate way to provide (mostly urban) people with eating options. However, they compromise other opportunities for eating more culturally appropriate foods and promoting an economy which produces and processes foods that do not make their way to the supermarket aisles. It is these other foods and these other people involved in the production of such foods that are ignored in the purity discourse.

Finally, notions of food sovereignty emphasize a preference for domestic production and self-sufficiency. This last premise is perhaps the most troubling for Aotearoa New Zealand due to its cooption of the purity discourse. Firstly, Aotearoa New Zealand is an exporting nation. As a former colony, food was originally produced for and exported to Britain. The terms of trade changed when Britain entered the European Economic Community (EEC), and Aotearoa New Zealand's agricultural sector expanded to where currently 95 % of all agricultural production

is slated for export (New Zealand Trade and Enterprise, n.d.). The dairy sector is the most significant actor and accounts for roughly one third of the global dairy trade (ibid.) through exporting nearly 95 % of its milk production (Dairy Companies Association of New Zealand, n.d.). The results of this over-reliance on agricultural exports for economic security are visible throughout the country where over 50 % of the land is used for agriculture, predominantly in the form of pasture (Statistics New Zealand 2008).

In terms of food sovereignty, one must question whether a country that uses so much of their land for agricultural exports can increase their potential to produce more food for local consumption (Burnett and Murphy 2014). This is not straightforward as the land that has historically been used for intensive agriculture is often too contaminated from synthetic inputs to be used for agriculture today; this is particularly evident in Auckland where much of the land used for market gardens prominent in the early 20th century contains large amounts of heavy metals which can limit the productivity of urban agriculture (Gaw 2002). However, Fonterra, the leading dairy cooperative in the country, promotes the pure discourse in order to set Aotearoa New Zealand dairy apart from other dairy exporters. Images of the rural idyll countryside and cattle poised in pastures of green grass imply an environmentally sound dairy production and a commitment to "producing high-quality dairy products [starting with] the clean, green pastures of New Zealand" (Fonterra, n.d.). Furthermore, Fonterra also draws on the purity discourse to set itself apart as a cooperative of "family farmers" as opposed to a more traditional agribusiness firm. However, the dairy industry continually comes under attack from environmental scientists who expose its environmental contradictions, particularly in regards to freshwater ecosystems (Foote et al. 2015). Intensification of agricultural farmlands, increased dependence on synthetic fertilizers, and urbanization all play a role in the declining health of Aotearoa New Zealand's freshwater ecosystems and significantly challenge the popular imaginations of environmental superiority (Anderson 2012). In other words, the Fonterra brand is as successful as the 100 % Pure brand in promoting a sense of moral and environmental superiority.

While the concepts of food security and food sovereignty seem relatively straightforward at first glance, when coupled with Aotearoa New Zealand's particular geographical imagination catalyzing purity, we can see how complicated these concepts truly are. Despite the brand's success in the tourism and agricultural export economies, Aotearoa New Zealand is most likely no more and no less "pure" than its competitors. However, the emphasis on maintaining this myth is unsettling for the social critic and results in a failure to imagine a more food secure or sovereign Aotearoa New Zealand. Beginning with the more innocuous concept of food security and its emphasis on ensuring sufficient and nutritious food to all people is problematic in a society underpinned by significant socioeconomic disparity masked by an image of purity. Similarly, this diversity challenges a straightforward concept of cultural appropriateness, important for food sovereignty. A reliance on only two supermarket chains in the country further stifles a more creative understanding of cultural appropriateness and opportunities for both diverse diets and diverse economic actors in food production. And lastly, while

agricultural exports believed to be more environmentally sustainable are essential for Aotearoa New Zealand's role in the global economy, they significantly challenge possibilities for self-reliance and domestic consumption, essential for developing a food sovereign economy.

Aotearoa New Zealand is not unique in its challenges towards a more food secure and food sovereign agenda, as many other nations (particularly in the Minority World) face their own array of obstacles (e.g., Alkon and Mares 2012). However, rather than assuming these obstacles are easily traversed, it is important to deconstruct them for their particularities. I have argued that Aotearoa New Zealand's reliance on discourses of purity provides specific challenges for the country in achieving food security or sovereignty. In an attempt to move ahead and come closer to achieving these goals, it is important to better understand the obstacles in order to effectively evaluate strategies to overcome them. Such an attempt exposes the political nature of everyday acts of eating and realizes the potential for more radical social change through food and agriculture.
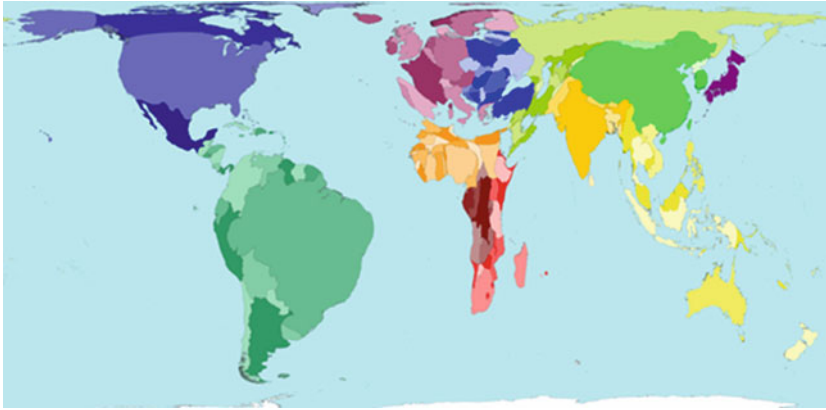
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Biocapacity. Biocapacity measures how biologically productive land is. Biologically productive land includes cropland, pasture, forests and fisheries. **Territory size shows the proportion of all biocapacity that is found there**. *Source* www.worldmapper.org. Published with kind permission of © Copyright Benjamin D. Hennig (Worldmapper Project)
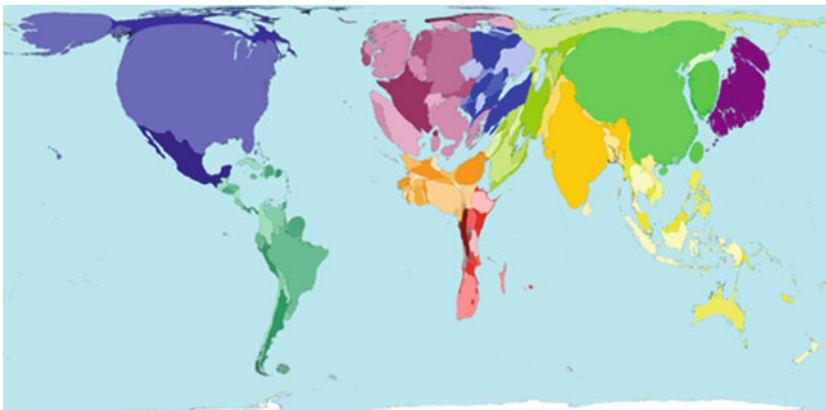
Ecological footprint. The ecological footprint is a measure of the area needed to support a population's lifestyle. This includes the consumption of food, fuel, wood, and fibers. Pollution, such as carbon dioxide emissions, is also counted as part of the footprint. **Territory size shows the proportion of the worldwide ecological footprint which is made there**. *Source* www. worldmapper.org. Published with kind permission of © Copyright Benjamin D. Hennig (Worldmapper Project)