BUILDING UNLIKELY ALLIANCES AROUND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN CANADA

Peter Andrée, Miranda Cobb, Leanne Moussa, and Emily Norgang

Introduction In Canada, “food sovereignty”—a discourse that has its origins in peasant struggles in the Global South against the neoliberal orientation of the World Trade Organization’s (WTO) Agreement on Agriculture¹—is increasingly being put forward by critics of the dominant food system in an effort to reframe domestic debates over food and agricultural policies. To La Via Campesina, the global peasant movement that initiated this cry, and with which many of these Canadian critics are affiliated, food sovereignty was first defined as “the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods, respecting cultural and productive diversity.”² In 2000, this definition was expanded to include the “right of peoples to define their agricultural and food policy.”³

Representative of the Canadian adoption of the discourse of food sovereignty is a shift within Food Secure Canada (FSC), the umbrella organization for Canada’s community food security movement. This movement brings together advocates for equitable access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food with activists working to establish sustainable local food systems.⁴ In recent years, leading members of FSC have been working alongside progressive farm organizations, anti-biotechnology activists, international solidarity organizations, and others to redefine their policy positions through the lens of food sovereignty.⁵ The primary vehicle for this effort to “build food sovereignty from the ground up” is the People’s Food Policy Project (PFPP), an ambitious consultation and policy-development exercise spearheaded in 2007 by key leaders within FSC and their social movement partners.
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Rather than present the details of the PFPP process, this paper focuses on how this emerging social movement might engage with existing sovereign powers in the form of the State, as well as the network of government and mainstream industry actors that currently play key roles in defining Canada’s food and agricultural policies. Given its focus on policy change, we consider the challenges that lie ahead by addressing these questions: first, what are the opportunities for building allies within government and industry to allow the emerging food sovereignty movement in Canada to advance its agenda in areas of federal jurisdiction? Second, what are the risks of such alliances and how can those risks be mitigated? Finally, at a theoretical level, what do the answers to these questions tell us about the possibilities and limits to building a counterhegemonic formation around the principles of food sovereignty in a “wealthy Northern country” such as Canada? Rooted in a methodology of community-based research (CBR), this paper begins to address these questions by examining how industry groups and government departments respond to specific policy proposals informed by calls for the “people’s” sovereignty over food.

The four proposals examined here (supply management in dairy and poultry, Canada’s new National Organic Standards (NOS), and positions on Product of Canada (PoC) labelling and abattoir regulations) were selected for their ability to further specific aspects of the food sovereignty agenda while also being potentially attractive to a wide range of policy actors—a reformist position that has clear implications for the results of this work, as we discuss below. On the one hand, they can be seen as the low-hanging fruit of the food sovereignty agenda. On the other hand, this research is premised on the view that these short-term and more reformist goals may help food sovereignists build the relationships necessary to move forward on their more ambitious agenda items as well. Notably, these four proposals were not the initial policy positions released when the results of the PFPP process were announced during the 2011 federal election campaign in Canada. In fact, the hypothetical positions examined here were developed in 2009, before the PFPP process had run its course, as a way of testing the waters for more concrete future policy positions. The 2011 PFPP proposals are discussed in our concluding section in relation to the results of this research.
This paper seeks to speak to two theoretical conversations. The first is about the political economy of Canada’s food system and the shape of neoliberalism in this context. The second is about the possibilities of building an alternative governance framework rooted in the principle of food sovereignty. On this latter question, we draw on—and add further definition to—the concept of counterhegemony as employed by neo-Gramscians.

Since its emergence into the national and international political economic sphere in the 1970s, neoliberalism has shifted from being a form of reactive politics concerned with an attack on Keynesianism, to the “purposeful construction and consolidation of neoliberalized state forms, modes of governance, and regulatory relations.”10 Initially associated with the “rolling-back” of the state and deregulation, in practice “neoliberalization has produced significant reregulation: new rules, new rule-making bodies, and new spheres of rule making.”11 In the downsizing of the state, neoliberal processes have also accorded new authority to social movement organizations (SMOs).12 Food security organizations, for example, have become increasingly institutionalized as emergency food providers, operating food banks, collective kitchens, and community gardens, and thus have gained a growing degree of authority in the provision of social services.13

Peck and Tickell argue that while one of the strengths of roll-back neoliberalism was its capacity to disorganize sources of political opposition, “roll-out neoliberalism is becoming just as conspicuously associated with disruption and resistance, as the process of deep neoliberalization has created new basing points, strategic targets, and weak spots.”14 These avenues for resistance are influenced by the relations of power within which that resistance takes place,15 pushing social movements to adopt the tactics and approaches valued within neoliberal discourse and supported by these structures. For example, SMOs looking to affect policy change have turned to market-based strategies in their struggles, as seen in the fair trade and organic farming movements, thus potentially further solidifying and reproducing the very order that has caused their plight in the first place.16 These processes appear to be deepening, even if we are already starting to move into a “post-neoliberal” age, as MacDonald and Ruckert suggest.17 Peck et al. refer to
this new era hangover as “Zombie neoliberalism,” describing it as the “living dead” phase in which “residual neoliberal impulses are sustained not by intellectual and moral leadership, or even by hegemonic force, but by underlying macroeconomic and macroinstitutional conditions.”

Their is a valuable insight, leading us to the added observation that, in food and agriculture, we are dealing with hangovers of earlier modes of regulation as well. Canada’s supply management system in dairy production (which pools milk regionally and actually pays farmers based on a formula related to their costs of production) can be thought of as representing one remnant of the postwar period of “embedded liberalism.”

This paper thus seeks to deepen our understanding of the contemporary political economy of agriculture and food in Canada and what it means for the politics of resistance. We also wish to contribute to theoretical understandings of the nature of hegemony and counterhegemony as developed by Gramsci and his interlocutors.

Rooted in Marxism, a neo-Gramscian approach assumes the centrality of the struggles that capitalist relations of production engender to contemporary politics. Where Gramsci and his followers part ways with “economistic” Marxists, however, is in their dismissal of the assumption that the material base necessarily defines ideological superstructure. Instead, they encourage an analysis of three sets of “relations of force”—the material, the institutional, and the discursive—and their interplay across three levels of mutually-constitutive political activity: civil society, the State, and global order.

Like Marx, Gramsci sees the State as the key sphere of “direct domination” of one social group by another. Gramsci is careful, however, to avoid according too much power to the State, narrowly defined. Ultimately, it is the “extended” or “integral” state that governs, including “both the apparatuses of government and the judiciary and the various voluntary and private associations and para-political institutions which make up civil society.”

This view of the state is linked to Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony, which refers to “not only a unison of economic and political aims” exercised by coercion, “but also intellectual and moral unity” established through consent. Neo-Gramscians thus foreground civil society “as the terrain for legitimizing as well as challenging” governance structures, and thus seek
to follow the complex relations between civil society and the State.26

Elsewhere, Andrée tackles the question of when hegemony is or is not an accurate descriptor for the power of a constellation of state and civil society forces working together to define the agrifood system.27 This paper speaks to a different question, regarding the nature and potential impacts of efforts to build a counterhegemonic governing coalition. In contrast to those neo-Gramscians who assume a sharp division between hegemonic and counterhegemonic forces, we propose that the very definitions of hegemony and counterhegemony mean that these two processes of leadership, compromise and accommodation, may be closely interconnected. Many of the same actors in a hegemonic constellation will become players in an ensuing counterhegemony as new bargains are struck around an alternative vision. The case of the food sovereignty movement in Canada, and its complex relationship to neoliberal structures, demonstrates the need for careful reflection on these dynamics.

Methodology This research is based on a series of 35 interviews undertaken with individuals representing departments of the federal government, industry organizations, retailers, and nongovernment organizations (NGOs). This project was undertaken in the spirit of CBR, which meant that the research questions, and our analysis of results, were closely informed by discussions with leaders of the PFPP. CBR is intended to integrate research and action for social change while maintaining mutually respectful relationships, promoting the sharing of authority, and establishing projects where everyone is involved as both researcher and learner.28 This research taught us that academics need to remain flexible when they adopt the CBR model. In this case, the level of involvement of our community partners shifted as their priorities shifted. Principles agreed to during early meetings continued to guide the project, but most of the interviews and final analysis were prepared by the authors of this paper, who identify more as academics than as PFPP activists.

Food Sovereignty in Canada Despite its origins in the Global South, Canadian organizations have participated in the global food sovereignty
movement from early in its existence. Canada’s National Farmers Union (NFU), for example, was actively involved in the efforts to establish *La Via Campesina*, and became a founding member in the early 1990s. Participation by the NFU and other progressive farm organizations (e.g., Quebec’s *Union Paysanne*) can be seen as a direct response to the neoliberal trends in Canadian agriculture over the last 40 years. Over this period, the federal government actively forwarded the goal of trade liberalization over farm stability in most agrifood sectors, furthering farm and industry consolidation, as well as deepening integration of Canadian farms into the North American industrial “grain-livestock complex.” One example of this integration is the way that Canadian calves are regularly shipped to US-subsidized corn feedlots and then back to the Canadian retail market. By the 1990s, some activists were likening the changes in agriculture taking place in Canada to the structural adjustment programs in the Global South that were putting Southern farmers in such a precarious position. These correlations meant that the soil was fertile for building North/South solidarity among small farmers on the basis of the principles of food sovereignty.

Three other groups of actors mobilized around food sovereignty in Canada in recent years: NGOs undertaking international solidarity and development work in the agricultural sector, including Unitarian Service Committee of Canada (USC Canada) and InterPares; Aboriginal organizations; and urban “food security” groups. Taken together, this heterogeneous group of SMOs have adopted the discourse of food sovereignty in reaction to various struggles for farmer protection, aboriginal rights, and the fight against hunger. Starting in 2007, a few leaders among these organizations initiated a process to bring their voices together in the form of the PFPP. The PFPP seeks to establish a federal food policy in Canada based on the six pillars of food sovereignty, as developed at the 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty in Nyéléni, Mali: Focus on Food for People; Value Food Providers; Localise Food Systems; Put Control Locally; Build Knowledge and Skills; and Work with Nature.

This research project’s focus on identifying “unlikely alliances” relates to the long-term goals of the PFPP and is consistent with the fact that policy is often described as a focal point for the food sovereignty movement. It
is notable, however, that for La Via Campesina “challenging the deep inequalities of power…is at the core of food sovereignty.” As a result, food sovereignists are generally more focused on building a global social movement from the bottom up than on examining the practicalities of policy design and implementation. From a neo-Gramscian standpoint, this latter process of policy design and implementation will involve building alliances around the emerging counterhegemonic “common sense” of food sovereignty. And, for better or worse, hegemony construction means making accommodations to other social groups in order to build momentum. The lack of active engagement in federal policy processes to date for many of the organizations involved in the PFPP suggests that they still have a long road ahead in Canada. One goal of this research is to contribute to the discussion of what that road might look like, and where the potholes lie.

Before proceeding with an analysis of possible future alliances, it is worth making some comments on the class dimensions of the food sovereignty “movement” as it currently stands in Canada, and what this means for its larger vision. At the global level, this movement has been challenged by the difference in the interests of peasant organizations and the international NGOs that work in this sector. The PFPP process in Canada is grounded in efforts to build links and solidarity across at least three further sets of class boundaries: North/South, indigenous/nonindigenous, and producer/consumer. Each of these binaries points to distinctive and potentially conflicting sets of interests. Furthermore, a quick scan of the FSC website, as a starting point, shows that most of the organizations involved under its umbrella have a primary focus of ensuring healthy food access for poor families. FSC leaders readily acknowledge that this is their starting point and that they are working to build respectful relationships that go well beyond that base, as well as trying to get their “base” to see that they have much in common with other groups marginalized within the current system. A recognition of the need to work through these and other class differences has been a central goal of the PFPP. Still, attempting to bring together marginalized voices from across such a diverse constituency involves creating a delicate balance among multiple needs and perspectives. All of this is needed well before deliberative dialogue can even begin with many of the “mainstream” policy actors discussed herein.
Testing the Waters If the PFPP is to have a policy impact in Canada, this will require making inroads among an even broader set of actors than are currently involved. How will these policy actors respond to proposals that enhance the “people’s” sovereignty over food? This question is addressed here by examining the perspectives of some key industry players and a range of government officials on representative positions advanced by advocates of federal-level food sovereignty. Although the response is complicated by the fact that neither industry nor government actors are homogeneous, the interviews conducted for this research do point to some potential opportunities for the PFPP. These proposals were selected to meet several criteria, including furthering (at least some of) the Nyéléni principles.

The first proposal examined is identifying areas of ongoing support for supply management in Canada’s dairy and poultry sectors. In general, organizations associated with the PFPP are supportive of the existing supply management framework in Canada, though those that work with small-scale producers also believe these systems—which require farmers to buy expensive quotas to have the right to sell into the system—create barriers for entry to small producers. The second policy proposal addressed is the call for clear and unambiguous “Product of Canada” (PoC) labelling for foods produced and sold within Canada. Although many food sovereignists support even more localized and regionalized food economies, clear PoC labelling is seen as a necessary first step in reducing “food miles” and supporting Canadian farmers. In recent years, the food labelling system in Canada was criticized for being potentially misleading because, until 2009, to be labelled “Product of Canada” only 51 percent of the total direct costs of producing or manufacturing the goods had to be Canadian. The third proposal is to ensure that Canada’s new national standards for organic food benefit, rather than harm, domestic organic producers wishing to sell into local markets, and that they assist rather than hinder the push towards sustainable agriculture more broadly. The fourth proposal is for the federal government to ensure that regulations in the area of abattoirs and meat processing support, rather than harm, smaller, locally oriented operations. This is because the general trend is towards tighter regulations that are hard to meet by small operators. As a result, since 1991 40 percent of provincially
inspected plants have closed in Ontario. In the sections that follow, we group the responses to these four positions into three general categories: two positive and one negative.

**Supply Management** The first positive response was elicited to proposals that go against the grain of the neoliberal model but fit in with long institutionalized forms of farmer protection in Canada. Canada’s Conservative government is not ideologically inclined to support these structures. In September 2011, it announced plans to dismantle the Canadian Wheat Board’s (CWB) monopoly. On supply management, however, similar moves have not yet been made. There are organizations that oppose supply management, including the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association, but they appear to have had limited political impact to date. Canada’s largest farm organizations, including the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA), are united around the continuation of existing supply management systems, and aside from the Conservatives, all major political parties in Canada strongly support supply management, including the separatist Bloc Québécois, which argues that Quebec farming is “fundamentally different” from that in the rest of Canada because of its strong domestic orientation. In 2010, when the Bloc still had significant representation in Parliament, its leader told a CFA conference that supply management is a critical tool for “developing Quebec agriculture and for maintaining food sovereignty” (our emphasis). Because of the widespread support for supply management, the federal government has argued for the preservation of these programs in international WTO negotiations. For example, in 2009 Canada’s International Trade Minister, Stockwell Day, stated: “We have to protect our supply management system. That’s our position and we’re going to continue to maintain it.”

This evidence shows that the food sovereignist’s position for maintaining supply management systems in Canada remains supported by others in the Canadian food and agricultural policy landscape, some of whom adopt the language of food sovereignty in the defence of these systems. It is important to note, however, that when the large farm organizations use the term food sovereignty, they may mean something quite different from the thinking of
organizations affiliated with the PFPP. For example, in 2009 the CFA adopted the language of food sovereignty as a way of explaining the right of every country “to determine and define its own agricultural and food policy.” However, this sentence also has the caveat “within the parameters of binding agreements it has chosen to enter into.” Furthermore, the CFA’s “Farm and Food Sovereignty and Security Declaration” also emphasizes “the importance of both domestic and export markets for Canadian agriculture producers,” as well as the right of farmers “to use…modern agricultural technology…[including] but not necessarily limited to intensive modern livestock production methods, biotechnology and pest management products.” In other words, the CFA’s definition of food sovereignty includes the right to produce in factory farms and export genetically modified organisms (GMOs). This is quite a different view from that presented in the Nyéléni declaration.

In the second category of positive responses from industry and government to the four policy proposals are those that align with a neoliberal food system, that is, proposals that are rooted in voluntarism and industry-led governance. This category includes responses to Product of Canada labelling and the National Organic Standards.

**Product of Canada** A variety of federal laws, regulations, and policies govern food labelling in Canada. These include the Food and Drug Act and the Consumer Packaging and Labelling Act. Both prohibit the provision of false or misleading information about a product, including labelling or advertising. The Canadian Agricultural Products Act and international trade agreements mandate declarations of country of origin on the labels of specific products, such as fresh fish, dairy, eggs, meat, fresh fruit, vegetables, and honey.

On 21 May 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper unveiled the new Canadian Food Labelling Initiative, allegedly in response to public pressure from Canadians seeking clearer information about the food they buy. It was also a response to impending developments in the United States. In September 2008, the United States brought in mandatory COOL requirements for most foods sold. The Canadian government responded to these
regulations with a WTO challenge, arguing that the US COOL legislation unfairly discriminates against Canadian producers under WTO agreements. Because the meat industry in North America is so well integrated, Canada argued that the mandatory COOL standards reduce competitiveness for both Canadian and US producers and processors by adding new costs to all. Shortly after the US COOL requirements were in place, in December of 2008 the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) issued Canada’s new voluntary labelling of country-of-origin for Canadian products sold within Canada. The Product of Canada regulations went from requiring that the last substantial transformation of the goods occur in Canada and that at least 51 percent of the total direct costs of producing or manufacturing the goods be Canadian, to requiring that 98 percent of ingredients, processing, and labour used to make the food product be Canadian.

Unfortunately, neither version of the guidelines is adequate to ensure the basic food sovereignist goal of widely adopted, clear, and unambiguous labelling for consumers. The previous guidelines misled consumers by not being stringent enough, while the new regulations mislead consumers by being too stringent. Many of the companies that use PoC labelling, and who recognized the problems with the 51 percent content, preferred to see 80 to 85 percent content requirements. One result of adopting the 98 percent figure is that companies are now simply removing PoC from their labels because, for example, strawberry jam made with Canadian berries but not Canadian sugar can no longer be PoC. A second example relates to the integrated North American livestock industry: many chicks are brought across the border from the United States at one-day old, and, although raised and processed in Canada, these chickens are not PoC under the 98 percent guideline. Instead, companies are turning to private branding initiatives to notify customers about the origin of ingredients. This fits with the broader neoliberal attitude towards privatized branding, as discussed below.

The debate that followed the government’s apparent misstep on the PoC guidelines shows that there are opportunities for alliances between food sovereignists and major industry players, but that organizations associated with the PFPP have some strategic choices to make. Two directions have emerged among food processors in response to the challenges associated
with the new guidelines. The first, put forward by the CFA, is to create a multilayered, Grown-in-Canada schema that ranges from 100 percent Grown in Canada to lower gradations. As a third-party regulated program, this initiative acts as an alternative to government regulation and appears to put a degree of control into the hands of local providers, which is one of the pillars of the Nyéléni declaration. Food sovereignists also reject the privatization of natural resources, however, and this approach clearly means further privatization and commodification of place-based foods, as well as increased costs in both time and money for all supply-chain participants to be certified. As a result, it likely will be of greater benefit to larger farmers and processors. The second direction is to work with the federal government on adjusting the PoC Guidelines because this route respects the food sovereignty pillars of food being “more than just a commodity” and rejecting privatization. This approach also keeps labelling rule-making in the public sector with minimal costs for farmers and processors. However, there are significant obstacles, including the widespread notion that PoC is now a “damaged brand,” “irrecoverable,” and a “dead issue,” and the lengthy processes involved in policy change.

In sum, organizations like the NFU, which took issue with the 51 percent requirement and now has similar concerns with the 98 percent, have found many allies among large food processors, meat packers, and retailers in Canada. That these PFPP-affiliated organizations have industry allies on this issue must be understood as due, in large part, to the voluntary nature of PoC labels (for domestic use as opposed to export). Similar to the NOS discussed next, this voluntary orientation is commensurate with a neoliberal food system predicated on consumer choice. The question now is which way to go in moving forward—towards even more voluntary, industry, and farmer-led standards, or towards less stringent federal PoC guidelines.

**National Organic Standards** As with Product of Canada labelling, the Canadian National Organic Standards (NOS) came out of years of voluntary compliance with industry-created standards. Then, after lengthy consultations, NOS became law in July 2009. There is general consensus among industry insiders and food sovereignty advocates alike that the
creation of the NOS was critical given the growth of the sector, and desirable given the need to reassure consumers that there were standards upon which the organic claim was based.\textsuperscript{72} The Canadian organic food market has grown at least 20 percent annually for the past several years, and in 2009 total sales in Canada were estimated at $2 billion/year, with 41 percent sold in conventional grocery stores.\textsuperscript{73} Given this economic clout, a strong federal policy track record with the creation of the NOS, and the existing ties between the organic sector organizations involved in the PFPP, the potential for the organic sector to influence federal food policy on behalf of the food sovereignty agenda is growing. The sector’s growing influence does, however, bring both risks and opportunities for food sovereignists in Canada.

Interviews with past and present federal officials highlighted some of the opportunities. First, the organic sector is in a position to direct its advocacy efforts at the federal level to encourage environmental sustainability in agriculture more generally. Second, the Government of Canada’s increasing interest in the organic export market could offer an opportunity to work with international partners to pressure policy changes. Third, since federal officials identified the need for a strong consumer voice for stakeholder consultations on Canadian food and agricultural policy,\textsuperscript{74} the organic sector is a good place to start. In order to leverage opportunities such as the three listed above, the organic sector and the food sovereignty movement must work in tandem. This poses at least three major challenges.

The first challenge is that the organic sector’s interactions with the federal government are oriented largely towards developing export markets. As a result, current advocacy initiatives fit into the existing political-economic system, rather than transforming it. Obviously, these efforts are not consistent with the food sovereignty movement’s stated goals to “localize food and put control locally.” A second challenge is that the creation of the NOS undermines the goal of moving more farmers towards sustainable production, a central pillar of food sovereignty. As Guthman argues, “standards-based regulation rests on the presumption that only some can meet those standards.”\textsuperscript{75} Indeed, the transition to organic is often difficult for farmers to survive and support for transitioning is limited.\textsuperscript{76} Food sovereignty activists need to look for ways to address the “barrier to entry” that the NOS creates,
rather than to simply accept it as a cost of doing business, which is the attitude of most proponents of organics. At the very least, advocacy efforts to increase financial support for conventional farmers wishing to transition to organic production would be beneficial. A third challenge is the contradicting motivations of traditional organic farmers in line with food sovereignty and large organic industrial farmers. The economic pressures from overseas markets pushed the development of national standards, but for many smaller farmers organics is an ideology consistent with food sovereignty—a belief in the value of food and sustainable farming. For this group, certification is mostly irrelevant because these producers deal directly with their consumers. Traditional organic farmers are the resistors to the neoliberal agenda, and the NOS are not designed with them in mind.

This point goes to the heart of the issue about whether the NOS impose unnecessary new costs and reporting requirements on small producers. Fortunately, the NOS apply to imported organic products or those sold across provincial boundaries; they do not have to be met by domestic producers serving local markets. This outcome was achieved because small farmer advocates were at the standard-setting table. In addition, federal government activities are supportive of developing productive capacity within Canada for meeting domestic demand. For example, the “Organic Value Added Roundtable,” a joint government and industry initiative, commissioned a study on organic beef and the challenges to increasing volume at the retail level. Therefore, while the NOS have been driven by an export orientation, organizations with a domestic orientation can be (and are) involved. Furthermore, this is an area of priority for the federal government.

Notably, like PoC, the “organic” approach to meeting health and sustainability goals is commensurate with a neoliberal food system; it is voluntary and industry led. Even federal government involvement in this sector has all of the hallmarks of “roll-out” neoliberalism. The Canadian government does not actually define organics; this is done by the Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB) through an industry working group. The federal regulations simply cite the CGSB standard, an evolving document allowing continual movement for industry, whereas other regulation is very difficult to amend. Furthermore, the organic certification process depends on about
35 third-party accreditation bodies, which are independent companies. This means that the Canadian government is at quite a distance from the definition, implementation, and monitoring of the NOS.

In sum, the Government of Canada’s recent interest in the organic sector and growing consumer demand could be leveraged by food sovereignty activists, but this will require efforts to mitigate a number of risks. The key lesson that the food sovereignty movement could learn from the NOS is that a diverse group of stakeholders can work together to create alternative institutional structures. However, this case also illustrates the inherent risk of co-optation, since only some norms have been challenged, while others remain tied to the larger agenda of a neoliberal productivism.

**Abattoir Regulations** The goal of ensuring that abattoir regulations support small- and mid-sized operations falls into a separate category because it more directly challenges the neoliberal order and lacks support from big industry. It also lacks the historical setting that has legitimized support at the federal level in the case of supply management. Still, there are characteristics of this case that allow for possibilities of resistance and cooperation, such as the sedimentation of decisions taken in earlier eras and the way in which the neoliberal period has increased the strength of SMOs to affect policy.

As with the rapid loss of provincially inspected plants in Ontario since 1991 noted earlier, the enactment of new Meat Inspection Regulations in British Columbia has forced about two-thirds of local abattoirs to shut their doors. Throughout Canada, changing regulations, supermarkets’ increased control over food supply chains, and the international political-economic context have led to beef production being dominated by three large companies, and a complete shift in the hog industry with a loss of 56 percent of small hog farms in Ontario since 1996. As they were an integral part of the food system, the loss of local abattoirs has had a major impact on farmers, retailers, and consumers, making the loss of local processing a central issue for food sovereignists in this country.

The current meat inspection system in Canada divides abattoirs into provincially and federally inspected facilities. Federal inspection is required for interprovincially or internationally traded meat, whereas only provincial
inspection is required if it remains within the province.\textsuperscript{89} Recent attention to slaughter and meatpacking is the result of public food safety concerns related to bovine spongiform encephalopathy, avian flu, salmonella, and listeria outbreaks. These incidents have led to a variety of reports and policy recommendations for tightening up the food safety regulations for meatpacking plants. Similar outbreaks and regulatory responses in the United States have also forced the Canadian government to change the way that meat is inspected in Canada prior to being shipped to the United States.\textsuperscript{90} One policy issue at the heart of the debate over meat inspection in Canada is the question of whether Canada should move towards a single federal standard based on export requirements.

The larger industry players in the food processing, distribution, and retail industries in Canada are in favour of a single standard for meat inspection across the country, rather than the two or three tiers (federal, provincial, and, in some provinces, municipal) that exist today. This sentiment was forcefully expressed by Michael McCain, CEO of Maple Leaf Foods, one of the largest food corporations in Canada, in the follow-up to a listeriosis outbreak at a Maple Leaf plant: “Right now, we have [a] two-tier system. It is clear to me and, I think, most scientists would agree with this, that the provincial standards are not at the same level as the federal standards.\textsuperscript{91}

Another industry spokesperson went further to say that it is important that consumers:

\begin{quote}
Have the confidence that they are buying the same quality and that the meat is as safe and meets all of the same requirements…In the case of…municipalities that have their own abattoirs, sometimes the requirements…are not as stringent.\textsuperscript{92}
\end{quote}

This discourse of food safety and modernization is tied explicitly to the consumers’ right to safe food. Its proponents frame it as being solely about facts, although we argue that specific values are implicit. This is because some of the differences between provincial and federal meat inspection rules (e.g., the requirement of docking space for an 18-wheeled truck) are more related to export requirements than to food safety demands. As one retired executive with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) noted, “the
legislation is really a trade and commerce piece and it has a whole set of food safety standards built within it.”

Abattoir regulation presents a unique situation because of Canada’s federalist history, which led to a federal-provincial division of regulatory authority. Though the current federal/provincial division is problematic, it is effective in ensuring food safety while creating opportunities for the food sovereignty movement to support networks of local and sustainable abattoirs. Even some advocates of a single system recognize this and appear to be unlikely allies of food sovereignists. For example, a major Canadian industry association is working to ensure that foreign meat processors comply with CFIA regulations on the labelling of processed meats. One interviewee spoke of the problem of low-price, large-volume, prepackaged meat being “dumped” in Canada from the United States without stating its country-of-origin. This organization independently polices such infractions of CFIA regulations by informing CFIA inspectors.

Overall, current meat inspection regulations present three challenges for the food sovereignty movement at the federal level. First, federal departments and large agribusinesses are focused on export and increasing Canada’s production capacity. They see the CFIA solely as working to protect the health of consumers. Meanwhile, food sovereignty advocates see the CFIA as having a conflicting dual mandate because it is responsible for both food safety and trade promotion. A second challenge is that there is often political pressure to resolve immediate issues receiving media attention such as safety at food processing plants, making it difficult to focus on the long-term picture. A final challenge is that some stakeholders within the meat industry and government place limited value on public consultation and dealing with civil society groups.

Despite these challenges, there are ways forward. The federal/provincial regulatory divide remains in place, and thus provincial-level regulations are unlikely to be abandoned any time soon in most provinces. Furthermore, the period of neoliberalization has, in many ways, strengthened the influence of SMOs, and specifically the “consumer voice.” This voice has an important role to play, especially in campaigns against food retailers directly. Due to central warehouses and products crossing borders, it is processors and
retail chains (rather than governments) that require that their products come from federally inspected facilities.96 The national scope of supermarkets has also opened the doors to new forms of resistance such as multisited coordinated campaigns.97 Interviews with industry players pointed to the importance of civil society groups (e.g., animal welfare organizations) in the development of regulatory policies,98 and this power can be harnessed by food sovereignists more broadly.

Food Sovereignty in the Context of Neoliberalization The story of which of these four demands are perceived positively and which negatively by the federal government and industry bodies is not particularly surprising. Those policies that fit within the current neoliberal policy orientation are perceived most favourably. This is precisely why some of these policies were selected to test the waters. Our hypothesis was that the adoption of such strategies offers a starting point for building wider alliances, and this research confirms that some new alliances on specific issues are possible. It was also encouraging to learn over the course of this research how the “sedimentation” of decisions taken in earlier eras continues to have a powerful impact on the policy landscape in Canada in ways that may be favourable to the food sovereignty cause. For example, consider the division of constitutional authority over agriculture (decided in the 1800s), which allows provinces to maintain their own standards for meat processing, or the establishment of the supply management systems in the last century. It is our view that this framework can provide the policy backbone for the food sovereignty movement in Canada as it moves forward. At the same time, we need to recognize that the voices in favour of maintaining and strengthening these structures are diverse, so the extent to which they will actually further the Nyéléni principles will be a matter of debate and negotiation.

These observations indicate the need for deeper analysis of the relationships between the demands of the food sovereignty movement and neoliberalism as a set of discourses and practices. These case studies show how the adoption of the language of “food sovereignty”—a discourse that emerged from a particular set of struggles in the Global South—in a wealthy northern country in the early part of the twenty-first century relates to neolib-
eralizations in complex ways. Food sovereignty operates as a discourse that challenges neoliberalism as a politics of truth, and yet it can also draw on some of the underpinning rationalities of neoliberalism, such as voluntarist mechanisms of governance, as it presents its solutions.

Lang, Barling, and Caraher would concur on this last point. They contend that there is a neoliberal policy trend from food governing to food governance, in which there is an “absence of direct state involvement” and “private and societal interests seek to exert forms of control within the market economy.” One implication of this trend is that the food industry becomes less accountable to the state, though whether they are ultimately more or less accountable to consumers (regarding safety and information claims, for example) remains to be seen. Some branding, such as the proposed CFA Grown in Canada program, certified organic standards, and the TransFair Canada label, are all subject to third-party oversight, and therefore appear to have a certain degree of public accountability.

Neoliberalism has also led to the growing capacity of civil society within a country like Canada to shape food policy. For example, it was broader neoliberal trends that allowed for the development of a voluntary organic food sector—against the wishes of the entrenched supply management systems, we might point out—that is now enshrined in the NOS. Two further important points are related to these broader neoliberal trends and what they might mean for the food sovereignty agenda: the first is the clear power of industry choices, and the second concerns the potential power of the consumer voice.

These case studies reveal a growing role of industry to establish and police their own rules in the Canadian food system. This fits clearly with neoliberal trends. In principle, it could also support the food sovereignty agenda if industry is pushed in this direction by citizen demands. With organics, we see an industry-led voluntary regulatory system being put in place that can, if carefully scrutinized, support more environmentally-friendly and socially just production systems. With place-of-origin labelling, it is a slightly different story. Industry players are increasingly choosing to establish their own labelling regimes, and the sole regulatory stick they have to pay attention to is the requirement that these labels are truthful. With abattoir
regulation and what this means for the possibility of localized supply chains, we also see the power of the supermarkets. Their internal policies have favoured federally over provincially inspected meat products, and if pushed they could change these policies to support the generally smaller, provincially inspected slaughterhouses buying meat from local farmers.

Interviews also brought to the fore the potential power of the consumer voice to gain a seat at policy tables, as well as to garner media attention. For example, a key mobilizing force behind the timely amendment to the “Product of Canada” section in the Guide to Food Labelling and Advertising103 was a CBC News Marketplace program titled “Made in Canada, Eh?”104 As one interviewee stated, the “TV program had some media coverage” that acted as “a catalyst.”105 This “media flurry,” combined with the “House of Commons hearings, a Standing Committee on Product of Canada,” led to the PMO announcing the regulation change.106

There are both opportunities and pitfalls to positioning food sovereignty policy demands in terms of the language of the consumer. For one, there is the danger that the notion of consumer sovereignty will be used to argue against onerous government regulation. Second, adopting the position of consumer raises a challenge for the food sovereignty movement, which seeks to build a citizen perspective rooted in the public interest rather than one rooted in individual interests. Cathleen Kneen, one of the leaders of PFPP, suggests that one of the PFPP’s main goals is to overcome the neoliberal ideology of individualism by forming alliances with groups—unions, NGOs, farm groups, and others—in order to “overcome the ‘individual’ by starting with the personal.” This is a laudable goal, but not an easy one to put into practice given the class divisions discussed above.

Despite these pitfalls, interviewees have indicated that there is an open door at the federal level to present food sovereignty through a consumer voice. Leveraging this opening, while remaining cognizant of the pitfalls, would allow PFPP member organizations and allies to build broader political support and gain a seat at a number of policy tables.107

Conclusions The results of this community-based research project suggest that the food sovereignty movement should proceed with caution when establishing relationships with various industry and government actors. This
observation fits with what Gramsci\(^{108}\) terms “transformismo,” or co-optation, which can now take place by both the “traditional” Left and the Right. Will the call for food sovereignty be channelled into protecting supply management systems at the expense of developing policies that actively support relocalizing food systems and small-scale sustainable agriculture? Some industry adopters of the language of food sovereignty in Canada would be quite happy with this. On the other hand, will food sovereignty simply be channelled into developing niche markets for organics and local foods for individual consumers (and their families) who desire this, while also supporting the “right” of Canadian producers to use GMOs and export their product to the world? The CFAs adoption of food sovereignty appears to suggest that this is the way forward, and the development of both organic regulations and PoC guidelines does nothing to undermine this vision. Where the principles of food sovereignty associated with the PFPP have their least immediate impact to date is where there are big interests with something to lose (e.g., the large meat packers). Where this movement’s ideas are picked up most strongly is where there are big interests with something to gain or be maintained (e.g., the agricultural unions supporting supply management). The growing power of consumers may provide a countervailing power to the growing power of industry, but this is not necessarily one that prioritizes public values, nor the needs of those most marginalized at present. All of this should serve as a caution for when the PFPP and its affiliate organizations begin to build broader alliances for moving the food sovereignty agenda forward in Canada.

What does this research tell us about the possibility for institutionalizing a counterhegemonic response in the Canadian food system around the discourse of food sovereignty? The case of the food sovereignty movement in Canada, and its complex relationship to neoliberal structures in particular, shows that hegemony and counterhegemonic possibilities advanced through the type of “war of position” that Gramsci advocates are likely to be closely interrelated in various ways. The examples demonstrate how food sovereignty provides a counterhegemonic response to neoliberalism, but may also be shaped by neoliberal values in important ways. Furthermore, some of the actors that are often perceived to be at the core of the food sovereignty project, such as organic farmers, also have interests in the neoliberal export-oriented
project. In addition, actors, like the marketing boards and mainstream agricultural organizations, who could possibly be brought on side with the right attention to their own interests in how food sovereignty is framed, will have more affinity for some of the Nyéléni principles than others.

All of this shows that building a coalition to actually institutionalize food sovereignty in Canada will of necessity require compromise, just as the hegemony of an industrial food system supportive of GMOs required compromise. Magnan arrived at a similar conclusion about the counterhegemonic coalition that emerged against the introduction of Roundup Ready Wheat in Canada. His research showed that while it was possible to build a coalition to stop this particular product, the larger critique of industrial agriculture was left behind in the process. Lessons can also be learned from the green movement. Studies of this movement in Europe show that direct SMO engagement with policy processes tends to water down the demands of these groups as they learn about the practicalities of policy and the exigencies of compromise.

And what does all of this tell us about counterhegemony as a concept? Just like Gramsci’s concept of the integral state, the counterhegemonic political project must be integral, including arms of the State and a variety of other interests. In the realm of food politics, it must also include a solid material base capable of continuing to feed people as we transition towards a more sustainable and equitable future. These exigencies mean that once established, even a counterhegemony will likely include actors that are currently part of the status quo. As Adkin points out, counterhegemony involves the “rearticulation of elements of existing identities, values, and conceptions of need” under a new overarching discourse. Given the complexity of what Gramsci termed the integral state, and the argument that hegemonies are built and reconstituted over time among various arms of the State and civil society, we argue that any “war of position” is likely to involve the reorganization of both new and existing policies and industries as they are retooled to serve new purposes. If this is true, it helps explain why politics, despite the provocations of many revolutionary ideas, often comes down to the practices of reform.
In conclusion, these four cases reveal that the food sovereignty movement is likely to succeed in having some of its agenda moved forward into policy in Canada, but this will take some compromise and the construction of a “big tent.” These realities—along with a recognition that the food sovereignty movement is young in this country at present—support the notion that it should continue to focus first on developing unity and coherence around its values and its policy platform, as it has been doing at the international level, before reaching outwards. At risk, given the vagueness of the food sovereignty position as a whole, is that only the veneer of their positions gets adopted through the popularization and commodification of organics and “local” food, for example. The deep commitment within the PFPP and La Via Campesina to ensuring the voices of the marginalized are included in food policy, is too easily lost.

If this research has taught us anything about what food sovereignty means in concrete policy terms, it is that this vision is ultimately more about process than a policy template. *La Via Campesina* speaks of the “right of peoples to define their agricultural and food policy.” Similarly, the PFPP has been process focused. The outcomes of the PFPP policy process released in early 2011—which include concrete policy positions on localizing food systems and making them more ecological, but also on eliminating poverty, and a national healthy food strategy that includes school meal programs, gardens, and food literacy programs—should be judged less on the content than on how they were arrived at, which was through a deep and broad process of grassroots consensus building. In the end, the promise of food sovereignty lies in decisionmaking structures rooted in the principles of deliberative democracy and the inclusion of those most marginalized by current structures. At this level, the PFPP appears to be well on its way towards building a movement for change, along with the NFU and their many other allies. When and how they then also bring in the “unlikely allies” discussed herein remains to be seen. Our research shows that the potential for building those tactical alliances is certainly there, on specific issues, when they are ready.
Notes

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1. For example, the WTO Agreement on Agriculture restricts governments’ role in defining their own national agricultural food policies while at the same time requiring them to import at least five percent of the national consumption of food. A.A. Desmarais, La Via Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2007).

2. Desmarais, La Via Campesina, p. 34.

3. Desmarais, La Via Campesina, p. 34.


6. For this, see Kneen, “Mobilisation and Convergence,” and <http://www.peoplesfoodpolicy.ca/> (assessed 21 September 2010).

7. Whether or not a food sovereignty “movement” even exists at this point in Canada is itself an important topic for analysis. Given our partnership with PFPP leaders, this paper is grounded in the view that such a movement is emerging around a shared vision. We also recognize, however, that one of our roles as academic collaborators is to encourage critical reflexivity about this movement’s makeup and goals. These issues are addressed further below.


29. Desmairais, *La Via Campesina*.


32. For example, F. Devereaux, *Feasting for Change* (Victoria, BC: Vancouver Island Health Authority, 2008).

33. For example, Toronto Food Policy Council, *Food Policy* (2009), <http://www.toronto.ca/health/tfpc_index.htm> (accessed 1 October 2010).


41. See Martin and Andrée (forthcoming) for an initial exploration of these issues.

42. Food Secure Canada, *Peoples Food Policy Project*.


44. In Canada’s federal system, the provinces have jurisdiction over many other issues of interest to food sovereignists, such as land-use planning and the delivery of most agricultural programs. The municipal level of government is also critical, given the potential role of municipalities in the furtherance of urban agriculture, for example. In the area of food and agriculture, the federal government is responsible for, among other areas, food safety, labelling, international and interprovincial trade, as well as food aid policies (Liberal Party of Canada, 2009).


47. Carter-Whitney, *Bringing Local Food Home*. 
50. L. Payton, “Quebec farms differ from rest of Canada: Ducapepe,” Toronto Sun (23 February 2010).
63. Carter-Whitney, Bringing Local Food Home.
64. Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), Guide to Food Labelling and Advertising, Chapter 4—Composition, Quality, Quantity and Origin Claims—Section 4.19.1 (2008).
65. Canada, House of Commons, Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, Blake Johnson of FCPC at Committee, Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, Evidence, 39th Parliament, 2nd Session (1 May 2008).
68. PFPP, Peoples Food Policy Project.
69. Interview 10 (2009).
70. Interviews 6 and 7 (2009).
72. Interviews 2, 3, 4, 8, 10 (2009).
74. Interview 2 (2009).
76. Interview 7 (2009).
77. Interviews 3 and 10 (2009).
78. Interview 3 (2009).
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82. Interview 9 (2009).
84. Interview 4 (2009).
86. Interview 6 (2009).
87. NFU, Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee.
88. Interview 7 (2009).
90. C. Prince, Memo to Inspection Staff, Canadian Food Inspection Agency (6 November 2009) (on file with authors).
92. Interview 6 (2009).
94. Interview 6 (2009).
95. Interview 7 (2009).
98. Interviews 8 and 11 (2009).
100. Lang, Barling, and Caraher, Food Policy: Integrating Health, Environment and Society, pp.77–78.
101. “TransFair Canada is a national, nonprofit Fair Trade certification organization, and the only Canadian member of the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations (FLO) International” (TransFair, no date).
103. CFIA, Guide to Food Labelling and Advertising.
104. CBC News Marketplace, Product of Canada, Eh?
105. Interview 7 (2009).
106. Interview 7 (2009).
114. Desmarais, La Via Campesina, p. 45.
115. Peoples Food Policy Project, “Resetting the Table: A People’s Food Policy for Canada,” (April 2011).