



Review of Alana Mann's *Global Activism in Food Politics: Power Shift*.



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Alana Mann. 2014. *Global Activism in Food Politics: Power Shift*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 205 pages, ISBN 978-1-137-34139-6 Cloth (\$95.00).

As an academic with expertise in Communications, Alana Mann has angled her unique book, *Global Activism in Food Politics*, to address the logistics of ‘framing’ in the global food sovereignty movement—an approach that underlines the delicate balancing act inherent in sustaining a transnational alliance with diverse local chapters. This particular occupational hazard derives from the unique structure of the central player in the food sovereignty movement: La Vía Campesina (LVC), whose operational principle depends on the autonomy of member organizations, even as LVC is committed to member-based collective action at extra-regional/national levels, all the way up to the United Nations Human Rights Council and the Food and Agricultural Organization’s Committee on World Food Security. *Power Shift*, the book’s subtitle, refers to the process of scaling up advocacy and discursive frames from grass-roots organizations via “engagement with state governments, regional trade councils and supranational bodies such as the FAO” (6). Mann notes that scale shifting can be “uneven, ambiguous and inconsistent” (144), given that the food sovereignty movement takes the form of a network, and that local political-economic conditions fluctuate, altering opportunities for grassroots organizations. Nevertheless, she emphasizes that “the scope for autonomy provided by loosely knit relationships paradoxically contributes to the durability and stability of the network” (144). And of course the thread running through this thoughtful study is that insofar as the food regime undermines farming cultures, exploits agricultural workers and degrades ecosystems, it provides continuing cause for collective action.

Another key thread in Mann's study concerns the nature of LVC as a transnational movement, purportedly the largest social movement in the world, spanning over 70 countries in North and South and involving over 200 million members (small producers and landless workers). She notes LVC's now legendary ability to resist representation by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and its jealous protection of its own agenda setting, which distinguish it from other transnational advocacy networks. This is a central theme in Mann's nuanced characterization of social movement logistics. Here Mann references social movement theorists' observations of the balancing act between local realities and transnational framing, suggesting that "the construction of a global campaign jeopardises the diversity of subject positions of members" (152).

She illustrates this diversity via a careful reconstruction of three case studies of domestic organizations: the National Association of Indigenous and Rural Women (ANAMURI), a Chilean organization uniting indigenous and non-indigenous women; the Asociación Nacional de Empresas Comercializadoras de Productores del Campo (ANEC), a Mexican civil association of 60,000 small/medium farmers and over 200 grain producer cooperatives; and the Basque Farmers' Union Euskal Herriko Nelazarien Elkartasuna (EHNE). As Mann notes, ANAMURI focuses on gender, indigenous and worker solidarities, organizing around seasonal worker health, sustainable agriculture and preservation of traditional seeds; ANEC focuses on preserving maize culture and sustainability of rural livelihoods (competing with agribusiness in the market); and, EHNE promotes Basque heritage, reaches out to consumer organizations, and engages in Spanish and European Union (EU) parliamentary politics. Mann's point is that food sovereignty provides the ideological bridge between such local/domestic social and political particularities, given the interpretive elasticity of the concept of 'food sovereignty.' This elasticity derives from the fundamental importance of local autonomy in a transnational movement to democratize food politics on the foundation of sustainable agriculture. As such, the food sovereignty frame is an alternative to neoliberal conceptions of food security (via 'free trade') in defending local economies, women's rights, agrarian reform programs (rural livelihoods rather than simply land reform, World Bank style), protection of diversity and indigenous seeds, and national food policy autonomy.

While Mann's book is devoted to evaluating the capacities and claims of the food sovereignty movement and its strategic alliance building, it also offers a cogent summary of the institutional contours and social, economic, and environmental consequences of the food regime. This includes a substantive mapping of the political economy of agribusiness, from production to retailing, and of the rise of oppositional movements (from land-based through identity-based to alternative food networks), to the impacts of neoliberal food security policies via a trade/investment regime that erodes local and national food provisioning as well as the integrity of

ecosystems. Given her discursive predilections, Mann pays close attention to representational strategies of the food sovereignty movement writ large, emphasizing a maturing human rights politics, including promoting “the peasant farmer as a viable economic entity” (35). This strategy resonates at the United Nations (UN), where a Resolution of the Human Rights Council has created an Intergovernmental Working Group to consider the formal recognition of the rights of peasants and rural workers (a group constituting 40 percent of humanity), acknowledging the key role small-scale producers play in global food provisioning (producing up to 70 percent of food).

While such initiatives, together with the incorporation of ‘food sovereignty’ principles in the national constitutions of Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, and in administrative organs of Senegal, Mali and Nepal, represent some “reclaiming of the state in the face of globalizing forces” (141), Mann is careful not to exaggerate the significance of these forms of ‘power shift.’ The UN of course is composed of member states, and, as Mann points out, Northern governments’ representatives “perceive that the struggle for peasant rights is not their struggle, and shy away from the very word ‘peasant’” (67), dismissing the mass of people who live and trade on the margins or outside of capitalist economy. Even so, Mann notes that LVC sees promising new openings in the international context, such as mounting resistance to U.S. ‘unilateralism,’ weakening of neoliberal institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, growing links between civil society and the UN, gradual recognition of food sovereignty by governments, the specter of TNC gigantism, and a maturing climate change debate in which LVC claims small-scale agriculture returns energy to the soil and reduces carbon emissions, effectively cooling the planet.

Arguably, the value of this comprehensive book is its didacticism, attentive to the possibilities and limits of alliance building. Mann notes that LVC is breaking out of its self-imposed autonomy (an initial strategy to avoid NGO-style compromise, or academic influence), and realizing the importance of reaching out to other movements and struggles, many of which are directly or indirectly connected to what is happening on the land (from consumer movements, through precariat struggles with race, class, and gender dimensions, and environmental movements), and various organizations like the World Social Forum, Occupy Wall Street, People’s Global Action, and Our World is Not for Sale. In these potential alliances Mann sees the possibility of mass actions attracting media attention and public notice, as precursors to putting pressure on governments, international/global governance institutions, and transnational corporations. Mann challenges the food sovereignty movement to recognize the significance of projecting alternative narratives via public media outlets to inform citizens and states of the rights and potential of farm cultures and communities that are effectively marginalized in neoliberal discourse, and to develop media training to understand how to gain access to media outlets and how to project alternative narratives.

And, where dominant narratives circumvent movement voices, access to alternative media outlets becomes critical. Here Mann emphasizes the importance of “providing opportunities for social movements to produce and generate their own content, alternative platforms enable them to avoid frame ‘traps’ that lead to ambiguity, error and misrepresentation” (160). Even there, she maintains, there is always a danger of reducing face-to-face encounters via keyboard activism. One solution she offers is the example of farmsubsidy.org, which provides an alternative, virtual, public sphere regarding agri-food politics in the EU. Thus: ‘While investigative journalists have traditionally sought to reveal government money-trails, the tools to do so are now available to citizens through cross-border data-sharing initiatives such as farmsubsidy.org’ (162). Finally, Mann outlines some important strategic possibilities for the food sovereignty movement, such as recognizing the livelihood dimension of biofuel production for some farming communities (even as fuel crops displace food crops) and addressing current conceptions of ‘crisis’ in such a way as to offer alternative ontological frameworks that preclude a market solution reflex and promote coalition building to transform food systems. At a time of growing interest in, and adaptation of, ‘food sovereignty’ demands and claims, this book is a comprehensive, clear-headed and challenging template for agri-food scholars and activists alike.

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