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# Food Riots and Protest: Agrarian Modernizations and Structural Crises

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**Summary.** — Food riots in the developing world have (re)gained momentum coinciding with converging financial, food, and global energy crises of 2007–08. High staple food prices across the world, and increasingly un-regulated food markets, have highlighted among other things the political dimensions of food-related protests. This has been the case especially in the MENA region but also in Sub Saharan Africa, East Asia, and Latin America where food-related protests have often been catalysts to contest wider processes of dissatisfaction with authoritarian and corrupt regimes.

After many years of silence, food-related struggles have begun to receive more attention in the academic literature. This has mostly been in the context of emerging debates on land grabbing, food security/sovereignty, and social movements. Yet there have been few attempts to provide a systematic enquiry of existing analytical perspectives and debates, or a clear assessment of what some of the political and economic implications may be, for what now seem to be persistent food protests and social struggles.

This article tries to fill this gap by mapping and reviewing the existing and emerging literature on urban and rural food-related protests. It also explores theories and methodologies that have shaped debate by locating these in an alternative world-historical analysis of political economy. The article includes, but also goes beyond, a critical review of the following authors and their important contribution to ongoing debate; Farshad Araghi; Henry Bernstein; Henrietta Friedmann and Philip McMichael; Jason Moore; Vandana Shiva, the World Bank and FAO publications and recent special issues of *Review, Journal of Agrarian Change* and *Journal of Peasant Studies*.

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*Key words* — food, protest, riots, Agrarian transformation, globalisation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the debates about food riots, why and how they have emerged and why they continue to be a persistent feature of development and underdevelopment in the Global South.

The article argues that food riots are just one acute form of structural, historical patterns of underdevelopment that are shaped by and in turn shape the political economy of food. The silent violence of hunger (Watts, 1983) is the most enduring feature of social formations in the Global South and there is much that has been written about it. Seldom, however, are food riots and the debates around them framed in the context of deeper patterns of capital accumulation that we argue have contributed to them. There is much debate about the efficacy of globalization, the importance of free trade and comparative advantage of southern food exporters but this mostly takes place in the continued and now rather labored rhetoric of “food security”. The preoccupation of the international financial institutions (IFIs) continues to be with getting prices right, improving opportunities for exports of usually high value, low nutritious foodstuffs, and for the food insecure states to import what they may not grow. Seldom is the international context used to help better understand national and local strategies for agrarian modernization and the consequences of that for levels of genuine food security: the ability of populations to access, whether through purchase or other means, sufficient calories to stave off hunger. The contradiction, seldom explored, is that food producers suffer first from hunger and that while urban workers and the precariat often lead riots, peasants and farmers also protest their absence of food security.

## 2. FOOD PRICES AND FOOD SECURITY

There has been an upward trend in global food commodity prices since 2000. Figure 1 indicates that the increase has been more acute since 2007. The price increases for wheat especially but also rice led to the period 2007–08 being labeled as the global food crisis (Bello, 2009; Johnston, 2010, p. 69; McMichael, 2009a). Overall world food prices in 2008 were 83% higher compared with 2005. The price of wheat rose by 130% and rice doubled in the first three months of 2008. The FAO food price index increased by more than 40% in 2008, compared with 9% in 2007—“a rate that was already unacceptable” according to the erstwhile head of FAO, Jacques Diouf (cited in Araghi, 2009a, p. 114; see also Bush, 2010; Schneider, 2008). This rapid fluctuation of food prices was dubbed “agflation” (McMichael, 2009a, p. 283). It occurred in tandem with rising prices of oil which for some authors not only signaled that food prices were driven by fuel price hikes but there was also “the integration of energy and food prices” (Patel & McMichael, 2009, p. 19; cf. Bradsher, 2008). For many critical scholars the world food price spike in 2008 indicated the end of cheap food (Moore, 2010a) and cheap ecology (Araghi, 2010).

The *Economist* food price index showed that “food prices were higher than any time since the index was created in

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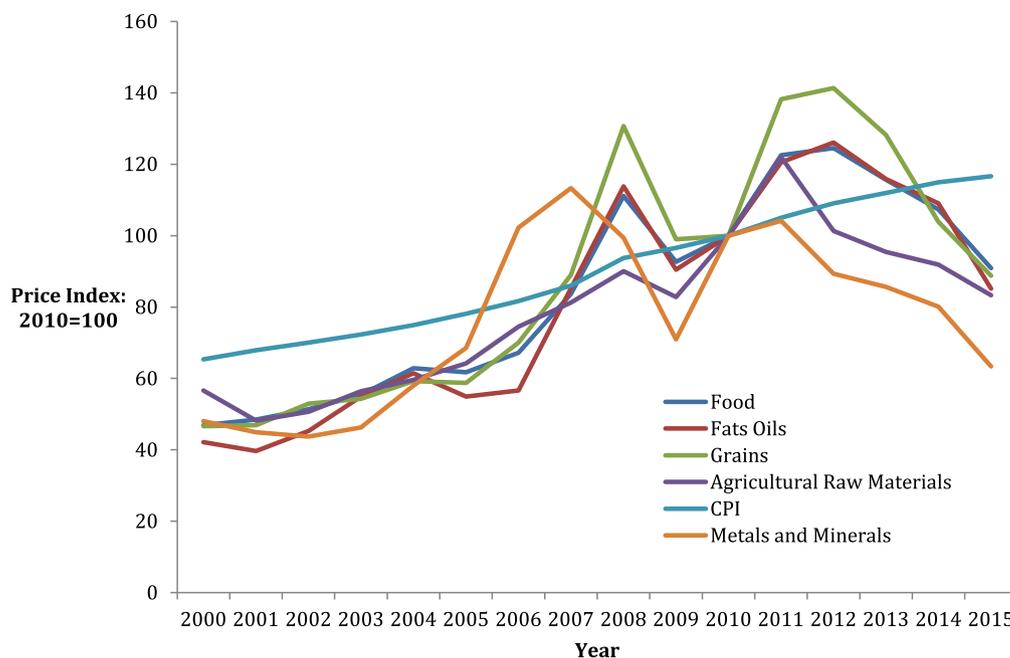


Figure 1. Selected world price indices 2000–15. Source: For Commodity price indices: World Bank, Global Economic Monitor [http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=global-economic-monitor-\(gem\)-commodities](http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=global-economic-monitor-(gem)-commodities). For World Consumer Price Index (CPI): World Bank, World Development Indicators <http://databank.worldbank.org/>

1845” (Araghi, 2009a, p. 113). Figure 1 indicates both the topsy turvy world of food prices, and how they outstripped agricultural raw material prices, metals, and minerals. In 2011, three years after the price spikes of 2008 the UN spoke of “global food crises” [emphasis added] (UNDESA, 2011, p. 62). Successive issues of the World Bank’s Food Price Watch (created in 2010, World Bank, 2010 but not published since 2014) highlight a new “episode” of the commodity boom. They described another round of food prices since the end of 2010 that remained high and near the 2008 peak and then, after a short decline at the end of 2011, peaked again in 2012 (see World Bank, 2016).

At the end of 2012, the World Bank noted “Even as the world seems to have averted a global food price crisis, a growing sense of a ‘new norm’ of high and volatile prices seems to be consolidating.” (World Bank, 2012).

Prices declined in 2013, spiking again in 2014 raising new anxieties about the possible re-occurrence of widespread food riots (Ahmed, 2014; World Bank, 2014, Year 5, Issue 17, May 2014). The prices of internationally traded grains and “other” foods increased 7% between January and April 2014 but they fell to a five-year low 14 months later in June 2015. The World Bank announced abundant food stocks and as oil prices fell so too did the energy-fueled grain prices. The World Bank has, however, been cautious. One senior economist noted;

The decline in food prices is welcome, because more poor people can potentially afford to buy food for their families. However, unexpected domestic food price fluctuations remain a possibility so it is crucial that countries are prepared to address dangerous food price hikes when and if they unfold.

[World Bank, 2015]

Food prices may have fallen, largely because of the fall in oil prices, and food stocks improved, but famine continues in Sub Saharan Africa. More than ten million people were on food aid in Ethiopia in 2016 and almost 5 million in Somalia,

40% of the population needed humanitarian assistance (IRIN, 2016). Poor country grain importers have difficulty managing domestic economies, not only when there are adverse weather conditions but also when they have to deal with dramatic price fluctuations in maintaining domestic food security. Price uncertainty and insecurity of supply adds to planning difficulties and potential domestic conflict. The World Bank has noted this with concern that political upheaval may accompany crises of access to food and the potential for hunger to be aggravated (Swan, Hardley, & Cichon, 2010). There was certainly a dramatic increase in “food riots” in the Global South during 2007–08. More than 25 countries were impacted (Schneider, 2008) and these riots took place as the poor became increasingly unable to access cash to buy food. Food crises were thus moments that highlighted broader patterns of poverty, power, and politics. They are also moments underpinned by persistent structural crises of people’s access to food at affordable prices that meet people’s changing needs and expectations. Price stabilization *per se* is insufficient to guarantee poor peoples access.

The first price spikes were almost a decade ago in 2008. Recent stabilization of prices may indicate that the situation is under control. But it seems that government social policy may be lagging a decade or so behind the reality for people under stress. Stabilizing prices, while welcome, is neither assured, nor is it going to be enough to provide development opportunities to those who have already been forced to change their way of life, for whom high prices remain a crucial barrier to improvements to life and for whom cultural change has swept away much that they once could rely on. It is time to start thinking not only about stabilizing the price of food, but also making it possible for citizens to have greater control over what and how they eat, alongside rights to care, equitable gender relations and a fair working environment.

[Green, 2016, np]

The dominant trope regarding “food security” fails to meet the concerns that Green has highlighted so clearly. The notion of food security emerged after the first world food summit in

1974 when Henry Kissinger ambitiously and disingenuously announced the end of hunger within 10 years. The next food summit in 1996 defined food security;

when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

[FAO, 1996]

Food security in the hands of the IFIs has concentrated on the ability of countries to purchase food on global markets; to liberalize domestic and international food markets and get local prices right (World Bank, 2016). The emphasis of IFI policy toward food insecure economies has been to promote the weary policy of comparative advantage: even poor countries should try and generate income that will enable food purchases on global markets rather than focus inward on generating greater autonomy and food sovereignty locally.

The mainstream focus on food security has tended to be rather state centric: national economies can import food and do not need to try and meet all their food needs by producing locally. Indeed, self-sufficiency was discouraged in the IMF and the World Bank advice to Sudan and Zimbabwe in the 80s, and of course war and conflict in Angola and Mozambique, Ethiopia and Somalia evidenced famine not merely as a consequence of conflict but as its goal (Macrae and Zwi, 1994, p. 11). Economies in the Global South were encouraged to embrace comparative advantage, which usually meant staying in colonially inherited patterns of export resource dependency, and to purchase food on international markets.

The preoccupation of commentary and intervention by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and policy makers more generally, is that food security can be attained with an efficient production and circulation of food through fine-tuned global commodity chains that connect producers with consumers. The outcome is that analysis tends to be essentially technical and productivist in character (Bush, 2014; Windfuhr & Jonsen, 2005, p. 15). There is also a rather Malthusian underpinning to the problems of food security: not enough food for a growing population, although which population and where is seldom spelled out (World Bank; Cleaver, 1994). Equally silent is any understanding of questions of power and control, or the means by which consumers can get the purchasing power to access food.

The dominant debate about food security tends to silence questions of order and governance in the international food regime. This is because of the institutionalization of World Trade Organization (WTO) rules and the dominant role of Transnational Corporations (TNCs) operating in conditions of quasi-monopoly (Patel & McMichael, 2009, p. 24). The World Bank and its rhetoric of food security has become the “natural” hegemonic horizon of all possible policy intervention. Washington IFIs confirm the ascendancy of management or in this case “BankSpeak” (Moretti, 2015). The World Bank has become the gatekeeper of debate and food security policy and assembling a robust critique of this hegemony is difficult. The dominance of the World Bank has at best only softened, and at worst stripped from the analysis of food and hunger, any analytical heft of the reasons that underpin agrarian crises unconnected to the fanciful world of perfect markets and commodity prices. In short, the World Bank has been successful in freeing analysis or statements of “poverty reduction” and “food security” from “all determinants of place and time, and all reference to its producers” (Latour and Woolgar quoted in Moretti, 2015, p. 96).

The World Bank has mainstreamed a neutralized and rhetorically at least, apolitical view of food security and the

violence generated by persistent food insecurity. In doing this, the Washington-based IFIs confirm the role that food security has played in the post war development project and the political opposition that accompanied it. Resistance is revealed in food riots and protest not only but especially since 2007 (McMichael, 2003). Rural riots have been part of the development of capitalism although it took longer to understand the scope and range, as well as the consequences of rural disposessions and transformations. Historians, much like most contemporary commentators of the Global South, seem instead to have been preoccupied with urban experiences of industrialization (Hobsbawm, 1965; Hobsbawm and Rude, 1969). Our argument is that in its present form the notion of food security has been emptied of any critical political content and mainstreamed. This is the result of a long historical process that we explore below.

There was an important and diverse antecedent to the mainstream capture of food security and this can be traced to the post WW2 period. This was the view expressed first by Mao Tse Tung, and then by Latin American and subsequently African radical liberation activists, that premised the objective of development on the central need for food self-sufficiency (and productivity). For Mao the principle of local food self-sufficiency was a pillar in the transformation and renewal of Chinese society under threats of external intervention (Bramall, 2009; Oi, 1991). Radical land redistribution in Latin America was a central strategy to relieve rural poverty and enhance local food production (Boyer, 2010). It became a strategy in parts of Africa too linked to a critique of dependency. Redistributive land reform as a mechanism to alleviate rural hunger, and also to promote political stability, was part of the imagination at least, if not always of the policy, of leaders and workers and farmers in the early post colonial period (Amin, 1976; Barraclough, 2001; Bush, 2002a; Bush, 2002b; El Ghonemy, 1999).

African political leaders became increasingly aware of the political use of food aid by western governments (Founou-Tchuigoua, 1990), and of the risks that droughts and recurring famines created jeopardising food provision at a national scale (Raikes, 1988). Many African states were at a crossroad in the early 1970s. They either accepted policy reform of market liberalization advised by the IFIs that de-regulated production and access to food, or they tried to further define a politics of self-sufficiency. This latter was to be anchored in the control and autonomy of the agri-food national system (Amin, 1990). The concept of food self-sufficiency has been a central element of a wider strategy aimed at establishing forms of self-centered and endogenous development. That was a strategy to oppose extraversion that had tied the uneven development of African, and other economies in the Global South, to the vagaries of international trade (Amara, 1988; Amin, 1990; Ferguson, 2006; Founou-Tchuigoua, 1990).

The Organisation of the African Union’s Lagos Plan, adopted in 1980, deepened a political agenda to propose concrete measures of food self-sufficiency. The preamble identified the historical-dependent integration of African economies in the world capitalist system that was identified as challenging local self-sufficiency. The urgency for a plan to explore self-sufficiency was partly driven by a US grain embargo to the USSR, which catalyzed Nigeria’s plan to Feed the Nation and efforts to highlight improved food provision in Algeria, Egypt, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Burkina Faso (Founou-Tchuigoua, 1990).

The IFIs’ response to the African nationalist explanation for persistent food insecurity was scathing. The FAO (1986) argued that the growing gap between high rates of

demographic growth, and low increases of food production, required the rehabilitation of agriculture with an emphasis on the increase of commercial production. According to the FAO, the crises required “technical adjustments” to pave the way to agricultural investments and agricultural modernization. The productivity emphasis echoed the trade-oriented and market-liberalizing focus of the World Bank that privileged instruments to stabilize food availability ([World Bank, 1986](#), p. 46). The [World Bank \(1986\)](#) offered a critique of national self-sufficiency by asserting that it was incompatible with economic growth. The World Bank argued against any state interventions and policy measures which depressed prices to the producers. Economic growth seemed to represent the pre-requisite for long-term food security, and foreign direct investment was the instrument to get out of the crisis.

The unifying theme of the IFI critique of the OAU, and any attempt at food self sufficiency, was the characterization of the “food problem”: peasants and pastoralists are poor because they do not commercialize a sufficient number of crops ([Cliffe, Pankhurst, & Lawrence, 1988](#), p. 132). The IFIs were silent on why the producers of food were the first to experience famines, and they ignored the dynamics through which poverty was produced and socially reproduced. Instead, the dominant food policy response seems to have been an attempt to forge one inclusive package of measures: there was no attempt to establish an understanding of the differential food needs of different social categories of poor, and the diverse socio-ecological conditions of African countries. The typology and model of production to be established in food deficit economies in the Global South was not to be established according to the food needs of the country, but by the law of comparative advantage. As McMichael put it:

the making of a free trade regime reconstructed food security as market relation, privileging and protecting corporate agriculture and placing small farmers at a comparative disadvantage. Food security would now be “governed” through the market, by corporate, rather than social, criteria.

[[McMichael, 2011](#), p. 136]

The years of structural adjustment, in the 80s and 90s marked a further shift away from understanding the specificity of particular poor country needs. There was instead a deepening of the economic dimension of comparative advantage. Food security became increasingly a function of the maximization of production and the optimization of food circulation at a global level. The concept was shorn of its political content and increasingly individualized at the level of people’s purchasing power, rights to food, and calorific intake.

### 3. AGRARIAN STUDIES AND POLITICAL ECONOMY: EXPLAINING FOOD RIOTS

We have noted the dramatic increase in food prices in 2007 and 2008. The dramatic escalation in food prices was a symptom of a deeper structural crisis of global capitalism. Hunger and food crises are persistent features of the modern world system. Yet the current phase of this crisis provides a new entry point to re-invigorate debates on the character of uneven global food production, circulation and consumption.

The food crisis can be read through both diachronic and synchronic lenses. This is because it represents “a crisis of the *longue duree*”, it is connected to the long-term contradictions of the capitalist world economy, and the way leading capitalist powers have tried to paper over the contradictions of these. It is thus a core feature of the crisis of the neoliberal conjuncture ([McMichael, 2009b](#), p. 1).

Mainstream interpretations of the crisis, especially economists within the IFIs, have asserted that the crisis results from disequilibrium between growing global demand and dwindling food supply. Major factors hampering the supply of food are identified as poor harvests and an export ban imposed by the major grain exporting countries such as Argentina, Cambodia, China, Egypt, India, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Russia, Ukraine, and Vietnam who restricted food exports in an attempt to stabilize domestic prices ([FAO, 2009](#), p. 10). On the other hand, mainstream commentators note a growing food demand from the large emerging BRIC countries and the related increased requirements for animal feed: grains which otherwise would have been used to meet dietary needs of those living in poor economies in the Global South. In the harmonic world of neo-classical economists no mention is made of structural aspects of the food crisis. Neither is there mention of the hierarchies within the global food system and the dynamics that underpin the changes in international food regimes.

The hegemonic narrative noted in our earlier discussion of the roles played by the World Bank and other IFIs in the food system, is reinforced by an argument which tends to portray the crisis as the outcome of “uncontrollable” forces ([McMichael, 2009b](#), p. 3). The crisis has been “normalized” and it is seen as the result of dynamics beyond the control of states and producers. In this sense the “market” takes on a life with its own consciousness and mirrors explanations that have associated the globalization of capital with natural events ([Wood, 2009](#)). A more accurate characterization of the recurrent nature of global food crises, and the implications of them for the Global South, involves de-naturalizing the crisis. This means to see food crises as an emanation of the political economy of capital accumulation ([Arrighi, 1999](#); [Hart, 2006](#)).

Critical analysis grounded in agrarian studies points to the relevance of a series of converging factors that shape the contours of the global food crises. They go beyond issues of demand and supply in food markets pointing instead toward the way in which market structures act to cement relations of political power ([McMichael, 2009b](#); [McMichael, 2013](#)). Two themes are important in this analysis. The first is the impact that increased concentration and centralization in the world food market has deepened the trend toward monopolistic and oligopolistic control. This has reinforced the economic power of agribusiness. The lengthening of supply chains under such monopoly control reduces autonomy and independence of especially small food producers increasing vulnerability to world market forces and environmental hazard.

The second theme, that has created conditions for the recent food crisis is the penetration of finance capital in the food sector. That has generated increased price volatility and world market oscillations notably because “acceptable” profit margins for equity capital investors are significantly higher than other economic actors ([The Economist, 2015](#)). This combination of finance with farming ([Fairbairn, 2014](#)) is financial speculation ([Clapp, 2014](#); [Isakson, 2014](#)). It is sometimes linked to the boom in biofuels which is estimated to have accounted for 30% of the increase in average grain prices ([Rosegrant, 2008](#); see also [Borras, McMichael, & Scoones, 2010](#)).

#### (a) *Food systems*

Underpinning the importance of recognizing the spread and deepening concentration and centralization of agri-capital is the concept of food systems analysis, and how food regimes have changed over time. The idea of world food systems and food regime analysis was introduced in the early 1980s ([Friedmann, 1982](#); [Friedmann, 1987](#); [Friedmann, 1993](#);

[Friedmann, 1994](#); [Friedmann & McMichael, 1989](#)). It is an analytic frame that helps explore the role of commercial agriculture in state formation. It helps to explore why and how food as a commodity determines people’s uneven access to what is essential for life and the ways in which large social movements like Via Campesina emerged to mobilize small food producers to protest their increased (global) dispossession from the planet’s most important means of production: land ([Desmarais, 2007](#)).

The heuristic device of food regimes within a context of world food systems has contributed immensely to help explain how the commercialization of agriculture has spread, and what some of the forms of resistance to that multifarious process have been in the Global South. [Table 1](#) provides a summary of key themes linked to the range of authors who use the insights gained from a world food systems approach.

Food regime analysis has been particularly important in explaining why countries in the Global South have moved from self-sufficiency to import dependence. It helps explain why and how US and EU subsidies ensure global prices for key grains like wheat, soybeans and rice are significantly less than the costs of production and why therefore farmers in SSA, for example, earning less than USD250 a year cannot compete with farmers in the OECD who receive subsidies up to USD20,000 per annum. Farmers in the Global South have protested repeatedly about the uneven playing field on which they are meant to be competing. Their limited resource base, however, and relatively weak political power has, it seems, done little to combat two important processes. The first of these is “de-peasantization”; up to 30 million in the Global South losing land due to trade liberalization and “de-agrarianization”, the persistent pressure for small family farmers to supplement poor agricultural earnings with off-farm income ([Bryceson, 2004](#)). The second, linked process is “de-agrarianization” the erosion of agricultural systems in the Global South. This may have the effect of accelerating “pluri-activity”, the multi occupational roles that farmers have always had ([van Ploeg, 2008](#)). However, the inability for farmers in the Global South to compete with subsidized northern agriculture, a key feature of the second food regime and one that has continued relevance, becomes a greater challenge during a more generalized crisis of capitalism when off farm

employment is reduced. As we will see later, dispossessed farmers, or those under such a threat, together with those who may straddle petty employment opportunities, between town and countryside, can be major participants in food riots. Possibly the most telling feature of de-agrarianization as an element of food crisis, underpinned by government policy and the acute propensity for farmer indebtedness, are the high number of farmer suicides. Debate rages about why suicide is so high among poor Chinese farmers, many of whom were displaced following the country’s rapid urbanization and in India where suicides have been linked with farmer vulnerability to crop failures and costs of GMO’s ([Kloor, 2014](#); [Shiva, 2015](#); [Borromes, 2012](#)).

The food regime is a ‘rule-governed structure of production and consumption of food on a world scale’ ([Friedmann, 1993](#), p.p. 30–31). It is an analytic frame that is rooted in an historical analysis of commercial agriculture that has been inextricably linked to state formation in Europe and the US. As Raj Patel has noted, “The story of the modern world food system begins in Europe and Britain in particular” ([Patel, 2008, p. 84](#)). The first food regime, from the 1870s to the onset of WW1, highlights the period of the UK’s dominance as the “workshop of the world” fed by cheap (settler) supplied food. The UK effectively outsourced staple food production exploiting new soil frontiers in the “New World” ([Bernstein, 2010](#); [McMichael, 2013](#)). The historical framing is crucial. It helps understand changes in the ways in which economies in the Global South have been coercively integrated into an expanding world market—something that the World Bank refused to recognize in responding to the OAU’s Lagos Plan, among other non-IFI initiatives. [Mike Davis \(2001, p. 299\)](#) showed with devastating acuity the impact on India of commoditization of grain. The country’s worst famines during 1875–1900 coincided with the dramatic expansion of grain exports from 3 to 10 million tons per annum and led to between 12 and 29 million deaths from starvation.

India was not alone in the cataclysmic impact of colonial agricultural transformation and the social impact and resistance to the expansion of the first food regime from the 1870s to the onset of WW1. Trade in primary commodities tripled during 1880–1914 and European markets for luxuries like sugar and tea confirmed a world agricultural market

Table 1. *World food systems*

First food regime 1870s–1914 farming to agriculture	Transition 1914–40s	Second food regime 1940s–73 agricultural modernisation during developmentalism	Third food regime 1973–end of developmentalism, accumulation by dispossession
Agricultural industrialization; steel, chemicals, electricity and oil, centrality of settler colonialism, British dominance	Free trade to Protection: Roosevelt’s new Deal	US dominance; Cold War; surplus food, PL480; industrialization of farming. Northern farm supports; overproduction, depressed prices. Idea of ‘right to food’ and ‘food security’	Grain price inflation 70s and 2005–08 Increased competition in agricultural trade; new entrants, end of Cold War signals end of strategic role for food aid. Trade liberalization, increased power of agri-business Idea of household food security
<b>Global South</b> Crop specialization Asia + Africa	<b>Global South</b> War, national struggles	<b>Global South</b> ISI, Capital intensive industrialization, labor surplus economies; cheap wheat imports, disarticulated agrarian transitions, debt and encouragement to export food	<b>Global South</b> Austerity; SAP; end of farmer supports and ISI; Relative becomes absolute depeasantization, displacement, enclosures; land grabs. Food security vs sovereignty, Farmer resistance, promotion of food and seeds as more than commodities

Sources: Adapted from themes raised in among others, [Bernstein \(2010\)](#) and [McMichael \(2013\)](#).

and labor regimes in the South that dislocated local systems of food production and consumption.

By the time of the transition to the second food regime in the early 1940s two major fault lines of contradiction were evident. The first related to the horror of the el Nino holocausts, the drought and induced famines of the end of the 19th century and the erosion of food self-sufficiency for non-settlers in the food exporting southern economies. The second was the evidence for struggles, many of which were rural, in what became known as the Third World, resistance that undermined British colonial dominance. The legacy of the first food regime was the “commodification of farming, shortage of agricultural labor and diets based on wheat and beef” (Friedmann, 2004, p. 128).

The second food regime 1940–73s, affirmed the structural imbalances in the world agrarian system. Northern grain surpluses were ostensibly to be used to support domestic producers and realize the post WW2 US agenda for “development”. In fact, a core dimension of US power became its use of PL480, subsidized grain sales for political gain, and the EU (like the US), protected domestic producers undermining existing and potential new entrants into Southern agriculture. This latter was delivered by the transition in US and EU farm strategy away from earlier extensive accumulation from new land frontiers to new developments in intensive accumulation. Relatively new entrants of multinational corporations in general, and their role in the specialization of food products, the development of the livestock complex, promotion of new seed stocks and high yielding variety seeds, suggested the potential to deliver the UN declared Freedom from Hunger Project in 1960 (FAO, 1960). However, the accelerated use of inorganic fertilizers and oil dependency did little to deliver food security in the Global South. Instead, the increased internationalization of capital driven by the newly emergent TNCs, moved away from directly controlling agricultural production toward extending and controlling upstream activities and sales, and in so doing promoted the ideology that they were “feeding the world” (George, 1979).

Understanding the structural imbalances in the world food system helps re-center the food debate around north–south contradictions: the former oriented toward over-consumption of food and ecological resources while the latter is enmeshed in a pattern of under-consumption (Araghi, 2009b). Such trends have been exacerbated, following decades of structural adjustment, by the withdrawal of the state in much of the Global South from food provisioning and the ensuing privatization of “food security” (McMichael, 2009b, p. 6).

The second food regime drew to a sudden close in 1972–73. US–Soviet détente gave Moscow access to US and other grain surpluses; a tripling of grain prices emerged as part of capitalist crisis, the fourfold increase in the price of petroleum 1974–79 and drought in SSA. These multivariate crises became the backdrop to the UN World Food Conference in 1974. The optimism of being able to end hunger in 10 years led to a call at the World Food Summit 22 years later, in 1996, to only reduce by half the 800 million who were still estimated to be suffering from hunger (Bush, 1996).

The third food regime after 1973 speedily introduced trade liberalization and austerity in the Global South. It also ushered in new rural discontent as patterns of de-peasantization and de-agrarianization accelerated farmer resistance and political opposition to the mainstream ideas of food security. The context in which this took place was the promotion of cheap food. Cheap food became a feature of modernity. It was part of a strategy for western capitalist interests to regain access to

cheap energy, raw materials, and labor power (Moore, 2010a, p. 225). This package of commodities or “four cheaps” was crucial to restore margins of profitability in the Global North. Cheapness here refers to low value composition of these commodities, or abstract social labor, the socially necessary labor time to produce food commodities. The cheap appropriation of resources and labor has been crucial to guarantee a higher rate of profit. For Moore, the commodity boom represents the single crisis of neoliberalism and a further symptom of the decay of the accumulation regime set up in the 1970s. A key feature of the post 1973 crisis of capitalism has been the difficulty in the capacity of the system to deliver strategic inputs, in a way that reduces rather than increases system-wide costs of production (Moore, 2010a, p. 225).

The 1970s was marked by the onset of the neo-liberal revolution and food commodity production and the accelerated and uneven transformation of small-holder farming in the Global South was part of that. Jason Moore’s work is significant in asking the question whether this was a conjuncture that signaled the tipping point of neoliberalism or if this was part of a more structural/epochal ecological crisis (Moore, 2010a, p. 233). Araghi (2010) has called the onset of the 70s transformatory crisis an indication of the exhaustion of the regime of “cheap ecology”.

A feature that has outlasted the third food regime has been the mostly persistently high price of commodities, including food and their price volatility. If 2003–11 was marked as the longest, most inflationary, and most inclusive commodity boom of the twentieth century (Moore, 2010a, p. 232), with 2008 representing the initial peak, another occurred more recently 2011–12. Moore’s explanation for this is that rising costs of production are connected to resource depletion and more significantly to the growing hegemony of finance capital over the entire capital accumulation process. The erosion of “four cheaps” represents a fall in real investments in labor productivity favouring instead, further financial expansion and appropriation of nature. This has fueled a new rush of speculation with finance capital flowing into commodity markets, land grabs and primitive accumulation aimed at stripping resources rather than investment in productive assets: this promotes new speculation and sustains volatility in commodity markets (Bello, 2009; Ghosh, 2010; Isakson, 2014).

Food riots and protest is a persistent feature of the “rupture in the longue durée relation between resource depletion, capital accumulation and financialization” (Moore, 2010a, p. 226). Neoliberal financialization of everyday life (Isakson, 2014) is not an aberration but is constitutive of capitalism’s socio-ecological contradictions as a whole. In this sense capitalism is a world-ecological regime where the accumulation of capital and the production of nature are an organic whole (Moore, 2010a, p. 227). The notion of world-ecology, therefore, is here deployed to capture the *oiekos* (a sort of immanent dialectic), between human and extra human natures or biophysical natures.

Moore’s work provides an important and salutary corrective to mainstream notions of food and agrarian crises. He links patterns of capital accumulation and crises of capitalism with climate change seen as a biospheric shift deeply interconnected with neoliberal industrial agriculture that has generated “negative value” (Moore, 2014). This systemic contradiction can only be (temporarily) overtaken by putting in place more toxic, and dangerous strategies in capital’s search for new cheap sources of labor and energy. Neo-liberalism has failed to produce a scientific revolution capable of sustaining persistent increases in labor productivity in agriculture. This is because bio-technologies have failed to improve yields, and sustain

increases in agribusiness profitability, at a level that sustains continuous further investment (Moore, 2010b). Even the use of glyphosate and other herbicides, and the related so-called disease resistant crops, have generated the phenomenon of the SuperWeed evolved to survive the assault of herbicides (Moore, 2010b, p. 400).

Jason Moore has highlighted many of the reasons that underpin global unrest with the international food regime and which lead to protest: the deleterious impact of the dominant forms of farm specialization and genetic uniformity eroding linkages between agriculture and ecology. Modern agricultures' assemblage of monocultures, mechanization, and chemicalization and genetic engineering (Altieri, 2000; Weis, 2010) has undermined cycles of nutrients of soil. These have eliminated the natural enemies of pests, which in turn is one of the major contributors to the ecological crisis (Bellamy-Foster & Magdoff, 2000) spurring further protest.

#### (b) *Violence and accumulation*

Violence plays a significant and persistent part of the historical narrative of food crises and food riots. Food regimes have developed alongside and been driven by the development of capitalist world economy, land enclosures, food crisis and ecological contradictions. The debate between continuity and change of the role of violence in the emergence of, and in its relationship to, capitalist development, has been read through the prism of primitive accumulation. Accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003; Harvey, 2005) and accumulation by displacement (Araghi, 2000; Araghi, 2009a) highlight the persistent feature of primitive accumulation even during the period of late neo-liberalism. This persistence, rather than the short-term transition to commercialized agriculture from displacement and dispossession, highlights the contradictions at the heart of capitalism. These are the violent strategies of capital accumulation that are sustained by the coercive role of the state to displace and marginalize poor farmers, and for the dispossessed to resist their displacement.

Karl Marx noted "so-called primitive accumulation... is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production" (Marx, 1867, p. 874). Marx understood that this process would be relatively short lived but rather than only lasting in the "prehistory" of capital, it has continued to shape the lives of especially, but not exclusively, those in the Global South (Bonfeld, 2002; De Angelis, 1999; Moyo, Yeros, & Jha, 2012).

Farshad Araghi has historicized the process of primitive accumulation to the world stage and connected it to food and ecological dynamics (Araghi, 2009a; Araghi, 2009b). He has highlighted how state policies have dismantled social welfare, deregulated land markets, removed import controls and food subsidies, imposed agro-exporting regimes, and exposed millions of agrarian petty producers in the Global South to corporate controlled heavily subsidized food, and highly capitalized agricultural producers in the North (Araghi, 2009a). There are two important contributions to the understanding of agrarian political economy and the ways in which food riots can be fathomed. First, Araghi contributes to our historical understanding of enclosure-induced displacement and the ways in which global peasantries have been caught in a storm of violent forces that uproot, dispossess and propel them into vast spaces of informal labor and urban slums. In doing so he highlights how migration ensures excess labor supply and low wages in the capitalist center. Second, he shows how the "invisible hand" of the market is not a *sui generis* reality (Araghi, 2009a). Instead the market works to silence the poli-

tics behind it. The spread of the so-called global market connects global push factors to politically constructed global agrarian relations, the post-war food order, and food aid and dumping, which cumulatively lay the preconditions for the transfer of the world's peasant populations to camps of surplus labor in urban locations (Li, 2010).

An alternative trajectory of agrarian change might result in a bifurcated agrarian structure in which an export-oriented, generally highly commercial agriculture sits side by side with a peasant subsector (Akram-Lodhi, Kay, & Borras, 2009, p. 215). In such social configuration neoliberal agrarian restructuring produces forms of differential, and adverse, incorporation of smallholders within circuits of global capitalism where production is undertaken by peasants, but not for peasants, under the logic of the market (Akram-Lodhi et al., 2009, p. 228; Martiniello, 2016).

The reorganization of division of labor on a global scale, the solidification of global value relations and the operation of the law of value on a world scale, has underdeveloped the rural Global South. We have already seen how the account of shifts in world food systems has served the interests of capital in the Global North through colonial transformation, the seizure of productive lands and unpaid family labor and slavery. And all this to meet the consumption needs of industrial urban capital, its workers and urban consumers (Mintz, 1986). The organized system of forced labor lowered food costs, which lowered wages and increased surplus value.

#### (c) *Crisis of social reproduction and food sovereignty*

Two processes have driven the history of global food systems. The first has been the attempt by owners of capital to supply cheap sources of food for an industrial workforce. The second has been the strategy to do that while generating rates of profit for an increasingly strong food sector. This has led to contradictions in the development of northern national capitalism highlighted by attempts to accommodate and quieten the working class, contain inflation and stagflation, and control increasing quantities of global natural resources.

The neo-liberal era after 1970 is noted by state attempts globally, not only at the heart of capitalism, to withdraw from the agrarian welfare state; withdraw from the Keynesian social compact with labor and impose instead flexibilization and casualization of labor; reconstruct global value relations leading to lost development decades in the South as a result of debt peonage, now felt acutely in parts of Europe's "periphery" like Greece.

The neo-liberal period of global capitalism has also featured the demise of redistributive land reform, often serving to undercut local mechanisms for coping with rural crises intensified with the privatization of the agrarian welfare state. Agribusiness, international and national in the Global South, has accelerated deregulation of land markets, commodification of seeds, promotion of agro-exports, often at the expense of food crops and therefore an increase in export cash crop production. The multivarious agrarian crises that have intensified as a result of these processes, marked in the new century by "land grabbing" has led to what one author has labeled a "global subsistence crisis" (Akram-Lodhi, 2012).

It may be more appropriate to describe the contemporary phase of the food crisis, and the linked food riots and political protests that have run alongside it, as a crisis of social reproduction (Bush, 2016; McMichael, 2009a; McMichael, 2009b). This means that the cumulative effect of de-peasantization and de-agrarianization has been to generate an expanding

reserve of labor. This in itself may not be catastrophic if the sequencing of such agricultural modernization provided for employment of the rural dispossessed. But it has not. It has instead led to “wasted lives” (Bauman, 2004), the so called “migration crisis” in Europe and the deteriorating conditions of social reproduction of labor. It has also led to resistance and opposition to the consequences of the impact that this modernization has taken, and it has certainly given greater weight to the development of the ideas of food security and food sovereignty.

The strongest reaction to the hegemony of food security has emerged under the heading of food sovereignty. This term refers to the right of nations and people to control their food systems, their markets, modes of production, food habits, and environment (Holt-Giménez, 2011; Wittman, Desmarais, & Wiebe, 2010, p. 2).

Food sovereignty sets itself apart from the idea and practices of food security that are rooted in notions of international trade, free markets and price equilibrium. Food sovereignty represents an epistemic fracture from previous ways of viewing the food question (McMichael, 2014). Political discontent has mounted with a modern food system that has been so dependent upon uniformity, capital intensity, GMOs and green revolution technology. Food sovereignty has been characterized as an attempt to develop a strategy that will reconstruct diversity and supersede homogeneity of the exchange value regimes (McMichael, 2013). The modern world food system has commoditized food to the extent that the hungry can only access sufficient nutrients for survival if they can purchase food. Food as a commodity has both an exchange and use value. Yet because it is a commodity that is both essential for life and stretches across many commodity chains, poor people are vulnerable to the uncertainties that surround access to it. These vulnerabilities are acute if the state under which they exist fails to ensure adequate local production, or cannot purchase and then distribute food at prices that are affordable for the most hungry. If the country is poor, and its territory ecologically marginal, there is likelihood of recurrent and persistent food crises and accompanying political opposition. Food sovereignty may be understood as the product of a peasant, small farmer praxis that promotes autonomy and the expansion of the rural resource base. Food sovereignty emerges in this context of rural subordination, dependence and expanding pressures from state and capitalist markets and actors (Martiniello, 2015a). It opens social enquiry to socio-ecological interactions and to the synergisms with biological components as a foundation for sustainable agro-ecological systems.

There nevertheless remains considerable ambiguity about the term and meaning of food sovereignty. Edelman (2014) asks whether the notion has any substantive meaning and Boyer (2010) highlights the semantic distance of the notion from everyday peasant conditions of insecurity. Peasants in Latin America, for example, recognized more the notion of *seguridad* to express their plight and challenges. Henry Bernstein (2014) suggests the small farmers cannot feed the world and thus while the term food sovereignty may serve a political appeal, and a rallying cry for action against the worst excesses of displacement, it cannot work economically as an alternative to the mainstream. But Bernstein also declares that the agrarian question is dead in the Global South (2010). He assumes that while generalized commodity production may not have commoditized all forms of rural existence, capitalism on a world scale has commoditized subsistence (Bernstein, 2010, p. 102). While there is much in Bernstein’s analysis that is important for understanding the ways in which farmers

negotiate the impact of capitalism, he has overemphasized the marginalization of peasants, replacing them with the category petty commodity producer. This does not bear much relation with what is happening on the ground. And it certainly does not sit easily alongside the comments from most of the commentators we have analyzed that explore the persistent and unresolved land and agrarian questions, where small farmers are in direct conflict with displacement and dispossession. It does little to also illuminate the debates raised at the UNs FAO during and since the 2014 international year of family farming. That year of engagement with advocates and protest movements for the continued viability of small-scale farmers led to highlighting, among other things, the positions of la Vía Campesina (Griffiths, 2014).

The debate was advanced further with the popularization of the ideas of agro-ecology and ecological farming. Vandana Shiva has argued that the paradigm of industrial agriculture has been rooted in war. The twin laws of exploitation and domination she argues “harm people’s health and the environment” (Shiva, 2016, p. 2). Her response has been to advance the importance of strategies that expand agro-ecology or relationships that link and embrace the interactions between soils, seeds, the sun and water as well as farmers. Her analysis, which she has advanced for more than 30 years, is to remind policy makers that “Taking care of the Earth and feeding people go hand in hand” (Shiva, 2016, p. 12). Her analysis of why and how industrial agriculture and the linked food systems have created ecological and financial crises is important, and is not dissimilar from many of the authors we have reviewed who are critical of the mainstream. She has also outlined a powerful agenda for what she describes as a transition from the law of exploitation to the law of return or an “ecologically sustainable, healthy, socially just, honest, and democratic food system” (Shiva, 2016, p. 139) Yet that agenda for action seems only rarely to involve social and class forces to deliver it. We have stressed, in contrast to many of the critiques of food sovereignty and agro-ecology, that the history of capitalism needs to include a reframing of the ways of understanding the agrarian question. We have argued the need to explore questions of accumulation and production and politics. We now see how these broad themes interact with, and are in turn shaped, by peasant and small farmer struggles.

#### 4. PROTEST AND RIOTS

We have stressed, like Patel and McMichael that food riots are seldom about only the price or accessibility of staple foods. Protest is more complex and relates to the political economy of food provisioning. Food riots are political in character and “need to be threaded through endogenous political debates and power struggles” (Patel & McMichael, 2009, p. 11). Like famine, food riots are part of larger political and economic crises and represent one manifestation and signal a point of crisis. This is why it is not always helpful to label protest as “IMF riots” although that did have a resonance in the late 80s and early 90s (Walton & Seddon, 1994). Doing so ignores the local and national dynamics and may obscure the articulation of the international economic forces, agents and drivers with internal power structures.

We can now see from the selected case studies, that protest and riot are “agential moments” (Patel & McMichael, 2009, p. 11) within a political economy context that opens the possibility for alternative political and economic formulations. These alternatives can perhaps be encapsulated in the phrase food sovereignty even where that may not be explicitly articulated.

The important character of each of the cases we now highlight, is that protest suggests, and is an expression of, a struggle for paradigmatic shift toward greater democratic control of local food systems and a rebellion against the neoliberal political economy.

(a) *Uganda*

Like many other countries in Africa, Uganda has undergone a period of violent popular upheaval that has included food riots that peaked in 2011 (*The New York Times* (April 21, 2011)). Some scholarship has tried to understand the relationship between economic shocks, often revealed by food price hikes and civil war ([Bruckner & Ciccone, 2010](#); [Carter & Bates, 2011](#)) while the state has tended instead to see popular protests merely from the perspective of security and law and order. The state, not only in Africa, avoids the link between economic shocks, social unrest and political instability ([Bellemare, 2013](#); [Lagi, Bertrand, & Bar-Yam, 2011](#)). There has been an assumption that protests in Africa have rarely achieved substantial political reforms. Yet there has also occasionally been commentary that has asked uncomfortable questions like why do protests occur? What are the actual socio-political conditions and historical experiences that drive them? Do popular protests define new terrains of politics and visions about democracy and development and affect political imagination and consciousness in African societies? ([Ake, 1995](#)). Seen through an historical perspective food protests and political unrest, among workers and small farmers, might be read as a third wave of popular protests in Africa in (dis)continuity with previous waves of contestation. The first of those was for national liberation and sovereignty against colonial rule, and the second for democratization against the post-independence authoritarian regimes ([Branch & Mampilly, 2015](#), p. 67).

The series of protests in Uganda during 2009–11 cannot be reduced to food riots *per se*. They have posed formidable challenges to state authority and the capacity of President Museveni's regime to maintain power. Protest has been driven by the inefficacy of donor-supported procedural democratization mechanisms of 1990–2000s. These failed to democratize or open the political space to public participation ([Brett, 2008](#); [Tripp, 2000](#)). This partly contributed to the emergence of popular discontent that eventually precipitated in violent popular protests.

The catalyst for political protest was acceleration in the decline in the conditions of the poor. That was driven by among other things a macro-economic conjuncture of high oil prices, currency devaluation and depreciation, shrinking purchasing power and double digit inflation. Poor urban social provision, low wages and 86% youth unemployment fueled political unrest. By early April 2011 inflation worsened and food price inflation reached 30–40%. One bunch of *matooke*, the staple food plantain bananas in the South of the country increased in price from 9,000 shillings at the end of 2010 to 27–30,000 in April 2011 ([New Vision, 2011](#)). To put this in context in 2011 the US dollar exchanged at 2,500 Uganda shillings (in late 2016 it was \$1 = 3,340 Uganda shillings). The minimum wage, established in 1994 was 6,000 Uganda shillings, or USD2.2 while the poverty line threshold is placed at USD2 ([Friedrich Ebert Stiftung \(FES\), 2011](#)).

Spearheaded by fast rising oil and food prices, riots erupted in April 2011 in the main cities, Kampala, Mbale, and Gulu where poverty, unemployment, and poor social services worsened an already precarious social order ([Martiniello, 2015a](#), p. 514). In May 2011, food inflation further rose to 39.3% and

the overall food inflation in the financial year 2011–12 reached 30.6% ([World Bank, 2013](#), p. 66). The urban poor and unemployed, lumpen-proletariat or “political society” ([Chatterjee, 2011](#)), were the major forces behind the outburst of food riots.

The riots were started by the urban underemployed and unemployed. They protested against the parallel increases in the price of fuel and food. The protests moved to a different level by linking the question of the food price increases to questions of political accountability, reform and change with the Walk-to-Work campaign. Fascinated by news coming from Tunisia and Egypt, the Walk-to-Work campaign was launched by opposition leaders and activists of the Action for Change pressure group. This action put rising costs of living and food prices and consequent increasing poverty at the center of the political agenda. “Political walking”, to borrow from Branch, galvanized a protest that emerged from people who walked to work. They could not afford *boda boda* fares, the imported two wheeled motorbike taxis. Price hikes followed the rise in fuel costs but for the protesters “a daily routine was turned into devastating critique of the regime” ([Branch & Mampilly, 2015](#), p. 129).

Though framed in economic terms the protests had a clear interlocutor: the state. The state was responsible for rising costs of living (especially fuel and food), high unemployment rates especially among youth, inflation, reduced wages and poor social service delivery. Yet the protests were not aimed at overthrowing the President, as they would become in Tunisia and Egypt. The demands in Uganda were aimed at fighting state apathy toward popular suffering. They pushed the government to address burning socio-economic issues. There were several important similarities between Uganda, Tunisia, and Egypt. A thirty-year dictatorship, long-term links with the US, huge donor support, high youth unemployment and rising social and economic inequalities.

The state police met protests with violent repression. Demonstrators were killed, hundreds of opposition leaders were jailed and activists injured. Widespread state militarization led to the occupation of key squares and nodal points in the city that might otherwise have been used to organize protests. There was also an expansion of the state surveillance apparatus.

Teacher and public servant trade unions did not join the protests. They had for a long time since the start of structural adjustment in the mid 80s, lost much of their political weight. There was also a conflict between workers who were in relatively secure work and those who were not. There was a fear that engaging in political actions would lead to dismissal. Civil society mobilization in support of protests and political reforms was also timid. Women and other community groups, local or international NGO initiatives, which also emerged in 2011, expressed themselves as being “apolitical”.

Notwithstanding these divisions the protests created a fertile ground for further dissent. In May 2011 a workers protest occurred at Kakira Sugar Cane Plantations against low wages and tough working conditions. Overall protests aimed to get state attention to create new political spaces by shifting the perimeter of politics beyond the terrain of official institutions. There was a difference between the large-scale, mostly urban uprising, and more localized rural forms of protest. The former captured the attention of the media, while protests and struggles of resistance in the countryside went largely unnoticed. The Ugandan countryside has been one of the epicenters of large-scale land acquisitions that affected 14.6% of the total agricultural land in the period during 2008–10 ([Friis and Reenberg, 2010](#), p. 12). There was a wave of capitalist land enclosures involving TNCs interested in the acquisition of land

for food and bio-fuels production, ranching schemes set up by national elites, Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) carbon capture schemes and forestry creation. Land acquisitions were also involved in conservation areas and game reserves for tourist purposes, infrastructural development projects and oil exploration (Martiniello, 2015b, p. 654).

Though scattered and prevalently “defensive” in character, social struggles in the countryside have sometimes succeeded in preventing land dispossession and displacement (Martiniello, 2015b). This is because land access is a key element in ensuring social security for rural households (Federici, 2004) and as the *sine qua non* for the articulation of bio-politics (Cavanagh & Benjaminen, 2015). Land grabs increased rural–urban migrations and worsened an already evident crisis of social reproduction for small-scale rural producers. Small farmers had suffered from increases in staple food prices, as they have been unable to produce enough food to reproduce rural households. Food insecurity crosses both urban and rural spaces. Landless rural households or impoverished tenants, especially those in Uganda’s southern region, that have insufficient access to rural assets and resources, failed to produce their own subsistence requirements (Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 2007).

Yet though neoliberal restructuring has the potential of bringing together different sectors of urban and rural spaces, as it affects livelihoods and social conditions of different strata that live in and cross different geographical spaces, protests have been unable to address urban–rural questions. Neoliberalism has had a consequence of reducing the town-countryside fractures, as food inaccessibility for example, has now increasingly become an issue not only for urban poor, but also for poor farmers who may be unable to afford to fully reproduce themselves through on-farm activities. As a result they have to rely on the same international food markets, and experience decline in already limited social service access. Having oriented their productive activities toward cash crops and commercial integration, farmers have resurrected other forms of off-farm employment in order to complement meager income from agricultural activities. Neoliberalism has also had the impact of blurring the distinction between state and capital by melting political and economic imperatives in its social and ideological project. Its political aims have been to reframe and consolidate the role of the state to intensify protection of capitalist interests in general, and notably through the safeguarding of property rights. Uganda like many other post-colonial states in the 21st century is seeking to do this by shaping the legal contours of the business environment and pursuing social order.

It is along the urban/rural axis that possible class alliances can provide the opportunities to define an alternative to the donor-supported and militarized neoliberalism. It is to the possibility or illustration of this that further research may focus.

#### (b) Burkina Faso

Political unrest and “spontaneous insurrections” (Engels, 2015, p. 92) has been a recurrent and distinguishing feature of Burkina Faso’s political economy. The food riots of 2008 highlighted the ways in which disturbances, ostensibly about high food prices, were part of a broader political unrest with state oppression and austerity. There is a long history of political uprisings since independence in 1960 that challenged state authority and military rule (Chouli, 2011). The inter-relationship between urban worker organizations and small

farmers has been an important dynamic in the role played by “popular classes”, students and small traders and farmers (Seddon & Zeilig, 2005) in holding a series of often-military governments to account. Food price spikes and increases in government collection of taxes from small traders sparked the riots in February 2008. Spontaneous rioting emerged from demonstrations and included attacks on government and non-government buildings and offices especially in the urban centers of Ouagadougou, Bobo-Dioulasso, Ouahigouya, and Banfora (Harsch, 2008).

The food riots, and the ensuing mostly urban-based violence, was driven by unemployed often young Burkinabè who were not members or affiliated to any organized political party or trades union. It is significant, however, that from March 2008 institutionalized forms of organized protest, especially from trade unions, promoted and tried to establish a sustained and entrenched opposition to the impact of austerity. One commentator has noted,

“In the case of Burkina Faso, the trade unions and other organizations took up the price issue promptly after the riots. In building upon existing networks and experience and farming the issue of price increases in a way that fitted their previous struggles and demands, they succeeded in mobilizing their clientele and broadening their social base”.

[Engels, 2015, p. 102]

The trade unions added weight and sustainability to the economic and political struggles against food prices, and a persistent cost of living crisis for most Burkinabè. They also tended to offer a stabilizing influence in trying to reduce violence and what might be seen as direct challenges to state power. There seems to have been a tension, similar to our other case studies, between social forces driving spontaneous and frequently more explosive and violent protest, and more formalized moderating influences of formal and often state organized trade unions. The latter gave a weight of numbers, sustained pattern of voiced opposition to repression evidenced throughout Burkina Faso’s history. The trade unions offered a more conservative interpretation of what effective protests and demonstrations looked like trying to reduce attacks on property. The large-scale movement, mostly inclusive of a range of different popular classes, *Coalition nationale de lutte contre la vie chère, la corruption, la fraude, l’impunité et pour les libertés* (coalition against the high cost of living, corruption, fraud, impunity and for basic freedoms (CCVC) reinforced the state’s dualist characterization of protest between “march” (*marché*)—peaceful protest, or “riot” (*émeute*)—damage to property and violence to the security forces (Engels, 2015, p. 101).

There were some important areas, however, where the state and the formal trade unions were persistently challenged by popular dissent. These included struggles in Burkina Faso’s gold mining sector, among sugar workers and cotton growers. Burkina Faso’s cotton sector is described as a sector that needs to be defended against undesirable disruption because it is viewed as a strategic asset akin to “white gold”. In 2007 cotton accounted for 85% of export earnings (World Bank, n.d.). Yet despite its important role as a major contributor to the country’s GDP just three companies control the sector. One of the most influential is Sofitex, linked with Monsanto and where protests were some of the most protracted. Peasant growers wanted an increase in the farm gate price because in March 2011 they were paid just a quarter of the world price. They also wanted a reduction in input costs and the sacking of Sofitex’s chief executive (Chouli, 2012, p. 14). Declaring “Enough is Enough!” peasants and a broad coalition of producers were encouraged by the National Union of Cotton Producers to lower their “utopian” demands. The Union itself said that “the peasant association is apolitical” (Chouli, 2012, p. 34).

Peasant producers had other ideas. Although they may have been at times divided in the strategy to accomplish improved prices for cotton and improvements to their livelihoods, farmer boycotts, crop and field damage and demonstrations generated a fierce resistance to austerity. In response to persistent disturbances throughout the summer of 2011 the state described farmer resistance as a “rebellion”. This led to a securitization of the countryside, arrest of peasant leaders that culminated in a large-scale demonstration of up to 1,000 peasants in the provincial capital of Boromo in Balé Province in the South of the country. Other protests in the cotton growing areas highlighted strong solidarity in villages between elders and youth, women and children who resisted police presence to prevent dissent (Chouli, 2012, p. 36).

(c) *Egypt and Tunisia*

Egypt has a long history of food riots and protest at high bread prices. The threat of reducing food subsidies in 1977 led to widespread protests. Riots in 2008, after the price of bread in private bakeries increased fivefold, led to seven deaths. Those deaths and the failure of Egypt’s dictatorship to ameliorate worsening economic crisis was a prelude to the toppling of Hosni Mubarak in January 2011. Egypt is the world’s most dependent economy on wheat imports and the price of wheat increased by 32% in 2010 and rice by 42%. The country only meets about 60% of its needs locally making it particularly vulnerable to unpredictable market price hikes. As many as 80% of rural Egyptians live on less than USD\$2 a day and the state food subsidy program costs perhaps as much as 2% of GDP, up to USD\$4 billion annually.

Egypt is an important example of the way in which the country’s ailing political economy and authoritarian governance created conditions for food and other linked protests (Bush, 1999). A popular slogan during the uprising in January 2011 was “*Aish, Hurriyyah, Adalah Ijtima’iyyah*” or “bread, freedom, social justice”. Egypt’s macro economic indicators during 2004–10 were very good. Yet high levels of foreign direct investment, gas and oil exports masked an economy dependent upon rents from labor remittances and the Suez Canal. High levels of capital flight and crony capitalists linked to the ruling National Democratic Party accelerated economic reform after 2004 intensifying crisis for one in four Egyptians categorized as poor (Achcar, 2013; Bush, 2016). Food inflation of 20% during 2005–10 deepened demands for increases in the minimum wage. During 2004–09 more than 2 million workers and their families engaged in industrial protests (Beinin, 2016). The assault on state tyranny was driven by strikes in the textile and rail industries and among agricultural workers. These were intensified by the development of new independent trades unions and links with consolidated political movements like *Kifaya* (“Enough”!) a protest against Mubarak lining up his son Gamal to succeed him and to advance rejection of Israel, together with the National Front for Change, (Abdelrahman, 2013; Abdelrahman, 2015; El Mahdi, 2012).

Working class and farmer protests in January 2011 were certainly driven by frustration at high food prices. Like the other cases we highlight, protest was inextricably linked to a political and economic struggle against the failures of neo-liberal reforms and entrenched authoritarianism. Egypt’s small farmers have often been at the center of political and economic struggles. They have contested the difficulties of rural livelihoods and the ways in which surpluses are drained from the countryside. Yet we can also note that small farmers have historically been marginalized from the very struggles to which they were initially drawn. This is an argument developed by

Saker El Nour (2015) who has documented three defining Egyptian nationalist and other historical struggles in 1918, 1952, and 2011. On each occasion he makes a compelling case as to how small farmers become marginalized by a range of moderating political and economic forces that draw on farmer political mobilization only to be squeezed from post conflict settlement.

Tenant farmer protest against Law 96 of 1992 was certainly contained by state repression (Saad, 2002). And farmer representation and involvement after 2011 in the drafting of Egypt’s new constitution was sidelined. Law 96 of 1992 revoked Nasser’s legislation that gave tenants rights to land in perpetuity and, among other things, controlled rents. More than one million tenants and their families were impacted and women-headed households were often particularly penalized with non-renewal of contracts, usually on the pretext that they simply would not be able to pay up to 400% increase in rent. There were often violent protests at implementation of the law especially in the Delta Governorate of Daqahliya where land pressure is some of the most intense. Farmer advocacy organizations like the Land Centre for Human Rights in Cairo, noted how during 1998–2000 there were at least 119 deaths, 846 injuries and almost 1,500 arrests relating to conflict following Law 96 of 1992 (Land Centre for Human Rights & Cairo, 2002, p. 127).

Farmer protest against the change in tenancy legislation continued after 2000. In the year preceding the 2011 uprising there were an estimated 2,000 arrests, more than 200 deaths and 1,500 injuries resulting from land and farmer disputes. After Mubarak was toppled, farmers seized moments to challenge landlords and also intensify struggles over land boundaries and irrigation access. Together with heightened discontent with market reform, that had allowed free reign to rural middlemen, who added to the costs of production not offset by improved market prices, farmers formed new associations and tried to influence the political chaos that followed the ousting of Mubarak and continued after the election of President Mohamed Morsi.

Early optimism that an alternative agrarian strategy might emerge with the new Egyptian President was short lived (Achcar, 2016). There was no break from the trade-based view of food security that invested in the continued belief that a strong economy can buy food on international markets rather than strive for self-sufficiency (Breisinger et al., 2012; FAO, 2013). Yet as we have noted, even during the boom years at the turn of 21st century, widespread hunger and poverty persisted contributing to the 2011 uprisings. Activist groups have been largely uninterested in assembling an agrarian strategy that can challenge the mainstream failures. An alternative, perhaps in the context of food sovereignty will need to understand the importance of redressing issues of rural inequality, social differentiation, unequal access to land and the need to boost rural incomes to make life in the countryside more attractive to Egyptian youth.

Egypt is not unique in actively excluding small farmers from developing an agrarian strategy that includes the producers of food in setting the agenda and promoting democratic decision-making. Tunisia has also advanced the trade-based view of food security and similarly experienced food riots and protest that culminated in the toppling the dictator Ben Ali in 2011. Agricultural modernization in Tunisia was premised on the expanding agribusiness export of high value low nutritious foodstuffs. The neo liberal reforms in the 1990s promoted the spatial reorganization of the country’s resources to the coastal areas undermining the development of the interior and in particular small farmer agriculture (Gana, 2012).

Investors expanded large-scale agricultural projects that increased erosion of groundwater reserves that hitherto small farmers had been dependent upon for irrigation. Small farmers in the arid South East, for example around Gabes, lost underground irrigation water after the early 1990s, to investors who drilled more and more wells. And the South Western town of Sidi Bouzid infamous for the location of Mohamed Bouazzi's suicide 17 December 2010, is a prime example of an area that has experienced small farmer rural dispossession, indebtedness and unemployment. That was the experience of Bouazzi's family. The semi-arid zone of sheep and camel herding and olives, cereals and almond production is, in fact, very productive but almost half the population lives on less than USD\$2 per day. The contradiction is what has been called the "green mirage". This is a rhetorical food security strategy that seems to have been put firmly in the hands of what locals in Sidi Bouzid have called *colons*. These are the new (Tunisian) colonialists who have funded the tremendous increase in irrigated farming that has undermined the region ecologically (Ayebe and Bush, 2014).

Small farmers protested and rioted in their opposition to Ben Ali and in the transitional chaos that ensued his removal from office. Agricultural workers occupied large farms disrupting the farming cycle and claiming land from which they had been dispossessed. There were also countless examples of struggles to access irrigation, cheaper inputs and better farm gate prices, and as in the Egyptian case, there has been both tension and collaboration between farmer struggles and trade unions that had long been in the pocket of the Tunisian regime (Gana, 2013; Beinen, 2016).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

We have argued that an understanding of food riots needs to be placed within a broader context of post war capitalism and the consequences of this for much of the Global South. "Food is a modality by which capitalism is lived and made

tangible in everyday experience" (Figueroa, 2015, p. 6) and the impact this has on social relations of production and reproduction is revealed by food riots. The riots referred to here, however, and more generally, are the result of deeper contradictions of capitalism that are unresolved. The contradictions of displacement and accumulation by dispossession, urban and rural poverty, suppression of wages, and livelihoods generate political protests. The conjunctural reason for conflict may be a spike in food prices but it is a mistake to see famines and food insecurity more generally without the important historical framing that highlights the structural and longer-term reasons behind persistent protest. To ignore historical and structural processes of inequality and how they are reproduced locally and internationally is to assume, as most policy makers seem to, that famines are events that just happen, as if by chance to poor unfortunates. In contrast we have indicated that in all cases there is an underlying anti-democratic, authoritarian attempt by states to offset long-term crises of capitalist accumulation with short-term repression. That then leads to another round of conflict thereby merely postponing further protest. Food riots and protests are always political. They can give voice to the exploitative processes and social relations of production around which food producers and consumers mobilize. "Food riots express elemental struggles around the conditions of social reproduction but those conditions are always political" (Patel & McMichael, 2009, p. 21). In doing this, protest attacks the rhetoric and policy failures of food security tropes and the agency of those like the World Bank and agribusiness.

Protests that may begin or end as food riots create the opportunity to challenge what Thompson (1971) labeled the "moral economy". This term was used to refer to the system of ideas that sustained governance in the eighteenth century. The development of capitalism and the ways in which the commodification of food was inextricably linked to the internationalization of capital has been challenged by political dissent throughout history and it will continue.

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