

Nourishing hope: Unraveling the path to justice in the global food system

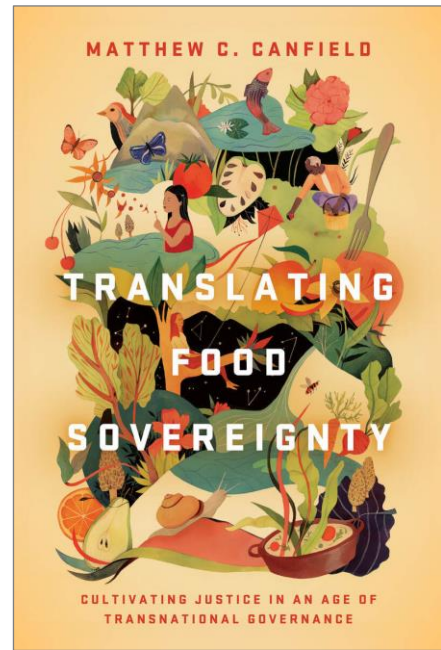
Book review by

Mallory Cerkleski *

Pisa Scuola Normale Superiore

Review of *Translating Food Sovereignty: Cultivating Justice in an Age of Transnational Governance*, by Matthew C. Canfield. (2022).

Published by Stanford University Press. Available as hardcover, paperback, and Kindle; 280 pages. Publisher's website: <https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=32739>



Submitted June 27, 2023 / Published online August 23, 2023

Citation: Cerkleski, M. (2023). Nourishing hope: Unraveling the path to justice in the global food system [Book review]. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 12(4), 223–225. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2023.124.019>

Copyright © 2023 by the Author. Published by the Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems. Open access under CC BY license.

In an era marked by widespread food insecurity and escalating concerns about climate change, *Translating Food Sovereignty: Cultivating Justice in an Age of Transnational Governance* by Matthew C. Canfield offers a timely and thought-provoking analysis of the global food system. Canfield explores the

* Mallory Cerkleski recently graduated with her MA from the University of Gastronomic Sciences (Pollenzo, Italy), where she focused her studies on the intersections of food, history, anthropology, and politics. Her research focuses on the perceptions of food systems and food distribution in socialist/post-socialist states as well as broader topics of food sovereignty, food justice, and food movements specifically with a decolonial or post-colonial lens. She is now pursuing her Ph.D. in history at Pisa Scuola Normale Superiore. She can be contacted at +1-305-509-2957 (WhatsApp) or mallory.cerkleski@gmail.com.

emerging food sovereignty movement, which challenges the dominant agro-industrial model and advocates for local and democratic control over food systems. As the reader progresses through the book, it becomes evident that Canfield embodies the essence of both a generalist and a specialist. With a wealth of experiences spanning from “formal” to “informal” and encompassing both legal and practical dimensions, each perspective presented feels remarkably comprehensive and worthy of serious consideration.

The food sovereignty movement originated in 1996 from members of Via Campesina, an international organization representing peasants. It emphasizes three main points: “Self-representation by peoples movements, a commitment to local and

Indigenous forms of knowledge, and the promotion of autonomy within food systems” (p. 19). Canfield’s research delves into contemporary calls for food sovereignty amid the rise of corporate-driven governance models facilitated by neoliberal globalization. The result: *governance from below*. While some may consider such ideas utopian, Canfield’s work challenges this perception and demonstrates that justice and systemic change exist within a tangible domain.

Within the realm of legal anthropology, scholars have generally explored how international human rights gain practical significance in diverse local contexts. In this vein, Canfield’s approach aligns, but with a particular focus on the strategies employed by social movement actors. He emphasizes their efforts in articulating claims of justice and creating networks that challenge neoliberal forms of governance on a transnational scale, showing the power and potential of collective action in driving change.


Canfield uses a strong theoretical approach, with each concept being paired with extensive fieldwork case studies. The theoretical concepts start with the main point of the book, which is “translation.” Canfield argues that food sovereignty can be understood as a set of “social practices of translation” (p. 7). While Canfield points out other scholars’ use of the term translation being “an interpretive process in which individuals and communities exercise power by constituting networks based on shared meanings, knowledge, and relations” (p. 18), Canfield suggests that there has not been a significant explanation of *practices* of such translation. Therefore, his contribution to the field is to show not just which, but how, these practices “serve as a form of mobilization in the blurred boundaries of transnational governance” (p. 19).

From this theoretical lens, we can follow Canfield’s nuanced approach as he delves into historical perspectives to create contemporary meanings of food sovereignty for activists. He illuminates efforts to assert the food sovereignty principles laid out above across various levels of governance, encompassing the local, regional, and global domains. The book begins with his engagement with two organizations in Seattle, Washington. The initial three chapters focus on food sovereignty

activism in the Pacific Northwest, providing a historical overview of alternative food activism in the region, including achievements like state certification of organic foods in the late 1970s. He then delves into the activist mobilization of food sovereignty frames from the late 2000s, particularly examining their involvement in a regional food policy council. Then, he explains his participation in an activist campaign supporting local farmworkers organizing within a multinational food brand’s supply chain and “asserting greater control over their lives and labor and about working toward transformative change” (p. 118). As the book goes on, Canfield shifts his focus beyond the Pacific Northwest and follows activists as they embark on campaigns and form alliances on a transnational level. One of these campaigns shows activists challenging the promotion of commercialized food biotechnology, the Super Banana, in Uganda, while the other case explores the mobilization of food sovereignty movement frames within the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization’s Committee on World Food Security. Canfield’s insights lead the reader in the end “to understand that these activists were radically recalibrating their horizons of social justice and developing new practices of mobilization in response to the metamorphosis of capitalism and regulation in an era of neoliberal globalization” (p. 5). Despite the distinct settings, the book ensures contextual understanding by densely footnoting relevant scholarly literature, a notable strength of the work. However, readers may encounter some transitional complexities between the chapters as the author uses many different case studies spanning space and time.

In conclusion, this book adds much to the field of food sovereignty as a movement, as it not only uplifts the voices of the most marginalized, but shows the power they can possess in their collectivity. Additionally, it aids academics across disciplines by giving insight into new theories and methodological approaches. Until encountering Canfield’s perspective, the literature surrounding food sovereignty appeared isolated and disconnected. Scholars tended to emphasize the term “food sovereignty” in the context of Latin America, while opting for different terminologies such as “food justice” in the United States (Motta, 2021).

Canfield's expertise in socio-legal studies and his deep engagement with the food sovereignty movement through detailed ethnographic research make this book a distinctive contribution to the field. It offers a new perspective on how different groups

of people communicate globally and work together for a common goal, instead of the siloing effect some theorists have, ultimately providing a fresh and vital viewpoint. 

Reference

Motta, R. (2021). Social movements as agents of change: Fighting intersectional food inequalities, building food as webs of life. *The Sociological Review*, 69(3), 603–625. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261211009061>