Farming for System Change: The Politics of Food Sovereignty and Climate Change in Canada

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

In this dissertation, I explore the overlap between climate change and food production, focusing on the concept of food sovereignty and the potential for ecological farming to help mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. I unveil how the concepts of food sovereignty and agroecology are (and are not) being taken up by Canadian farmers, farmers’ organizations and others who have a stake in climate change debates. Based on two years of scholar-activist-oriented research, including interviews with farmers and ethnographic engagements on farms and at events focused on agricultural politics and practices, I describe the opportunities and constraints for agroecological approaches to contribute to mitigating climate change, as well as the significant political, geographical and socio-cultural challenges that are generally inhibiting the actualization of food sovereignty in Canada. Focusing on the work of La Vía Campesina’s two member organizations in this country, the National Farmers Union (NFU) and Union Paysanne, I am concerned with the basic problem of how tensions between systemic and pragmatic changes are articulated through agroecology initiatives and food sovereignty advocacy. My essential claim is that a broad counterhegemonic movement will be required in order for there to be a significant shift in climate and food politics in Canada. Food sovereignty and agroecology have the potential to be incorporated into a system change agenda, I argue, but any serious effort to move them forward, and tackle climate change, will require
confronting capitalism itself. I do not suggest that this will necessarily require overt anticapitalist campaigns, but rather that farmers and other food sovereignty proponents will do well to grapple with the structural constraints within capitalism, while finding ways to talk about and pursue radical change through ostensibly more prosaic initiatives. As part of the counterhegemonic shift I am pointing to, I also argue that farmers’ organizations will need to prioritize both strategic alliance-building with various groups, as well as political education activities that can help both farmers and non-farmers make progress on these fronts, disrupting apolitical approaches to climate and food issues.
Acknowledgements

Like any doctoral project, this one has taken a lot of effort, but the effort expended therein has certainly not been mine alone. There are so many people to whom I feel gratitude, and the task of sufficiently expressing my thanks could easily be longer than this dissertation itself. In an effort to be succinct then, here are my concise, albeit admittedly somewhat inadequate thanks…

First of all, thank you to all of the farmers who have helped this dissertation come to fruition. It pains me that this is the case but, for confidentiality’s sake, I cannot name names here. You know who you are though. You have taken the time to sit down for an interview, show me around your farm, and—in many cases—welcome me into your home for days or weeks. In explaining the inner workings of ecological farming and agricultural politics, you have been extraordinarily patient with me, a lifelong city dweller (or, dare I say, a lifelong ‘citiot’)! I feel very fortunate that so many of you have become good friends, and I look forward to keeping in touch. As most of you are members of the National Farmers Union (NFU) and Union Paysanne, I know that it will be easy to maintain contact, as we’ll undoubtedly be continuing on with the struggle for food sovereignty and agroecology in Canada and Quebec. Special props to the NFU’s International Program Committee (IPC), Indigenous Solidarity Working Group, and Local 305 in Ontario, and to Union Paysanne’s comité international. Viva la lucha! Pour les francophones qui aimerait lire les resultats de ma recherche dans votre langue maternelle, je suis tellement désolé que ce mémoire n’est que disponible en anglais. Je ferai de mon mieux pour collaborer avec certaines parmi vous pour publier mes pensées en français aussi! Thank you as well, farmers, for doing what you do every day: putting in incredibly long and difficult hours to produce food in the most ecological, just and ethical way possible. In writing this dissertation, it was not easy to try to balance the sympathetic views I have toward your struggles, and the critiques that I wanted to offer in a gesture of solidarity. If I have gotten any of this right then I have you to thank. If you have any constructive criticism to return then I would be happy to hear it!

Endless gratitude also goes out to my friends, colleagues and mentors at the University of Toronto. Most importantly, Scott Prudham, my supervisor who not only saw me through this PhD but also my Master’s degree. Scott, I can’t say how much you’ve taught me about research methods, theory, and precision in writing. This dissertation may still have flaws, but I’ll take responsibility for those,
while you deserve a lot of credit for helping me to get it into good shape. You spent a lot of time guiding me through necessary edits of each individual chapter plus a couple of rounds of revisions of the whole document. More generally, you pushed me in the right direction to help me find my critical voice. I know you’ll say it’s your job to do this stuff, but I appreciate the care you put into it. I also enjoyed taking your class, working with you as a Teaching Assistant, and riffing with you over puns and other ‘dad’ jokes. Heck, we even went camping together after one AAG meeting. It was in tents.

The rest of my supervisory committee was also hugely supportive. Mike Ekers helped me to understand both Gramsci and the Agrarian Question better, and offered a plethora of thoughtful suggestions during my final stages of editing. It was also great working with you as both an RA and TA. Sarah Wakefield helped me to think through scholar-activism, and to sharpen my analysis of structural constraints under capitalism. It was also excellent to TA with you, as I admire the energy you put in to teaching and the approach you take to helping students understand the food system. Ken MacDonald helped me to develop my methodology, which included some very helpful specific suggestions about participant observation, and provided some good ideas about how to be disciplined about my writing schedule. Taking the PhD core course with you was a meaningful experience, as we covered so much ground.

Of course, I would not have earned my PhD if it were not for the engagement of my external reader, Tony Weis, and of my internal reader, Josée Johnston, during the final stretch. Thank you both, for your generous feedback and thoughtful questions and comments. I’m confident that your critical insights will help me to produce tighter publications that result from this dissertation. I also appreciate Ryan Isakson for his consistent encouragement and positivity, and Marney Isaac, for helping many of us at U of T to bridge the physical and social aspects of agroecology. Robert Lewis provided excellent guidance as I shifted into Course Instructor roles, and Jessica Finlayson and the rest of the staff in the department have been just phenomenal.

I have also learned a lot from, and had a ton of fun with, my friends in the Department of Geography and Planning. This includes members of my cohort and of the University of Toronto Environmental Politics Working Group (UTEPWG). The latter group helped me improve upon an early version of my third chapter, on top of other writing projects along the way, and it was
incredibly helpful for me to engage with your work as well. Thanks to Martin Danyluk, Elsie Lewison, Laura Vaz-Jones, Travis Bost, Lazar Konforti, Becky McMillan, Killian McCormack, Nickie Van Lier, Sam Walker, Nicole Latulippe, Beyhan Farhadi, Chris Webb, Laura Tozer, Robert Kopack, Leah Marie Fusco and Yi Wang. Cynthia Morinville, tu as été une camarade de bureau formidable—Merci particulièrement d’avoir m’aider à améliorer mon français parlé et écrit. Zach Anderson, you were probably the first person to encourage me to do a PhD, while I was still in the early stages of my Master’s degree. Thank you. It has been a real trip, and I’m very glad that you and Rosa van den Beemt made your way to the east end—Many more nights of board games and brews to come! Adam Zendel, Isa Urrutia and the Tenure Tracks helped me to leave my keyboard and plug in my electric guitar on a few occasions, which was a nice break.

To those of you who have moved on from the department, thanks for generally being awesome: Caitlin Henry, Katie Mazer, Emily Reid-Musson, Elizabeth Lord, David Seitz, and Dan Cohen. Lauren Kepkiewicz, your work continues to inspire me to consider the centrality of Indigenous food sovereignty to struggles for food sovereignty and agroecology across Canada and throughout Turtle Island. It was a privilege to work on the Keeping ‘our’ land article with you. Outside of the department / U of T, I am grateful for the friendship and collaboration of many people, including Terran Giacomini, the Hype Squad and everyone who worked so hard during the CUPE 3902 strike of 2015, Julia Laforge, Charles Levkoe and Airin Stephens, Phil Mount, Annette Desmarais, and Marie-Josée Massicotte.

Finally, I want to thank family and friends without whom I wouldn’t have had the courage to take on a doctoral project, and without whom I wouldn’t have had nearly as much fun over the last five years. Curtis Maloley and Nicole Aylwin, you’ve been an important part of this journey. You both know the highs and lows of academic work, and I appreciate the genuine interest you’ve taken in seeing me succeed. You’ve been my ‘go-to’ people for celebrating all the little milestones along the way too. Cheers. Mike Eves and Ashley Gibb, Lisa and Esko Remmel, Eric Mang and Joeddi Marshall-Mang, Ryan Starr, Olivier and Erin Trescases, David Langille and Susan McMurray… You’ve all been so supportive and have kept me laughing along the way. Indie McFadden was literally next to me for most of the time I was reading and completing research for, and writing my dissertation, and he never once criticized my work. I still miss you like crazy, little buddy. Betty and Larry McFadden, and Christine, Sean and Joshua Monson, you have all provided me with great
company, particularly during the many days and weeks that I worked at the cabin. I know I had to put in long hours sometimes, but there were many excellent meals, libations, swims and hikes along the way. Mom, Dad, and Adrian, if there was anything that set me up for success before I returned to school, it was living my whole life surrounded by such genuine and kind people. Words can’t express how grateful I am. Kelly and Teegan, I’m so glad you’re both part of the family now too, and I promise I won’t ask either of you to read my dissertation any time soon!

Without a doubt, Kim McFadden has singularly been the most important person in terms of my ability to complete this PhD. We’ve been together for twenty years now, and for seven of them I’ve been immersed in graduate studies. (How did you put up with me?!) You’ve done the most to keep me grounded along the way, ensuring that I have had some semblance of a work-life balance, and you did an outstanding job of motivating me at the same time. Who knew that planning a big party several months in advance would provide such an incentive to get this project wrapped up? Seriously, you’re an inspiration in more ways than you can imagine. It’s not an exaggeration to say that everyone who knows you is baffled by your generosity, passion, empathy, commitment, humour and endless love. I must be the person who is baffled the most, and I feel unbelievably lucky that I’ve had you here to make my load seem weightless. I love you.

With sincerity, and in solidarity with you all,
Bryan
November 9, 2018
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### Abbreviations

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAFC</td>
<td>Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COP</td>
<td>Conference of the Parties (to the UNFCCC in this case)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ENGO</td>
<td>Environmental Non-Governmental Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAO</td>
<td>Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FBR</td>
<td>Farm Business Registration</td>
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<tr>
<td>GHG</td>
<td>Greenhouse Gas</td>
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<tr>
<td>GMO</td>
<td>Genetically Modified Organism</td>
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<tr>
<td>LVC</td>
<td>La Vía Campesina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAPAQ</td>
<td>Ministère de l’Agriculture, des Pêcheries et de l’Alimentation du Québec (Quebec’s Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MST</td>
<td>Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Workers’ Movement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAFTA</td>
<td>North American Free Trade Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NFU</td>
<td>National Farmers Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPIC</td>
<td>Non-Profit Industrial Complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OMAFRA</td>
<td>Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAR</td>
<td>Participatory Action Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RJME</td>
<td>Réseau des joyeux maraîchers écologiques (Joyful Ecological Market Gardeners Network)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNFCCC</td>
<td>United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPA</td>
<td>Union des producteurs agricoles (Agricultural Producers Union; not to be confused with Union Paysanne)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTO</td>
<td>World Trade Organization</td>
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Much is expected of food sovereignty. Despite its broad political currency (or perhaps because of it), food sovereignty is often taken up as a set of demands, principles, policies, reforms and rights that together will somehow transform the neoliberal food regime, without identifying the profound structural changes needed in the capitalist economy and the liberal state for food sovereignty to feasibly exist. This oversight plagues many of the demands that adhere to food sovereignty (such as ‘food democracy’, ‘food justice’ and the ‘right to food’) with intractable political contradictions. While it is unreasonable for food sovereignty practitioners and scholars to assume the task of charting a global course through late capitalism, none of us can escape the need for political reflection on the particular role of food sovereignty in pushing this transition in a post-capitalist direction.

- Edelman et al., 2014: 927 (emphasis in original)

L’utopie, ce n’est pas de croire qu’on ne peut pas changer les choses, mais plutôt de croire que le système actuel va perdurer. La diminution constante du nombre de fermes, l’accroissement des monocultures et de la spécialisation, les coûts sociaux engendrés par la mauvaise gestion des ressources; tout cela ne peut pas continuer longtemps.

Utopia isn’t believing that we cannot change things, but rather believing that the current system will endure. The steady decline in the number of farms, the growth of monocultures and increase in specialization, the social costs generated by the mismanagement of resources—All of this cannot continue for long.

- Maxime Laplante, Union Paysanne, November 2017
Oh! Oh! Nature mourns, Humanity perishes!
Why? Seasons have changed
Now unpredictable and unreliable!
Hotter, drier and shorter!
Winds and storms harsher and destructive
Mother Earth mourns, the land is barren.
Women, men and children, plants and animals perish!

Capitalist industrial agriculture, what have you done?
Everywhere, Mother Earth crumbles
As toxics and harmful GMO seeds swell her belly.
Heavy machines trample her belly
Their dark plumes polluting the sky,
A new baby, Climate Change, is conceived and born!

Oh! What is all this?
Ecological niches shrink
Biodiversity fast disappears
Greater uncertainty hovers everywhere
Heightened risks for us the food producers
Traditional agriculture knowledge is fast eroding
What and who shall save us?

Climate change knows no peace,
Hungers only for destruction!
Greed for profits feeds him!
Extreme, extreme, extreme weather phenomena are your fruits!
Environmental and humanitarian disasters!

Floods, droughts, landslides, diseases!
Humanity cries: No Food!
Nature cries: Inhabitable! Inhabitable!
Is there a remedy?
Yes, but we hear only false solutions!
Free Markets, REDD, Climate Smart agriculture,
Green economy, Agrofuels, Carbon trading, land grabbing, more industrial farming,
Massive use of herbicides, inorganic fertilizers and More GMOs!
Oh Lord! All to grow climate change! Why?
Profits! Profits! More profits! Cries Capitalism, his father!

But hope looms in the horizon
Food sovereignty, our hope!
Comes to restore social justice to humanity,
Ecological sustainability to nature
Biodiversity and cultural diversity to all peoples of Mother Earth!
Arise ye peoples, women and men, the landless,
peasants,
Indigenous farmers, forest and fisherfolk,
Let your hope be heard in all the corners of the earth!

Peasant Agroecology for Climate Justice NOW!
Globalise Struggle! Globalise Hope!

- Climate Justice Poem, Zimbabwean Peasant Movement, December 2017
Chapter 1

Introduction: Globalizing the Struggle

1.1 - Hope amidst converging crises

A City-dweller gets his hands dirty

Removing potato beetles from potato plants is not a glamorous task. The insects, with their hard, striped shells, can be difficult to handle as you quickly search for them in the foliage, hunched over and likely swatting at mosquitoes or black flies at the same time. The larvae of the Colorado potato beetle (*Leptinotarsa decemlineata*) are particularly unpleasant, and the common approach is to squish them between your fingers as you advance down a row of potato plants, working as speedily as you can. It is the summer of 2015 and I am getting my first taste of farm work, spending just over three weeks at a small vegetable operation in Saguenay, Quebec. As someone who grew up in a large city (Toronto, Ontario), I am not accustomed to tasks such as this, nor to equally unglamorous activities like turning over a compost pile. I do not think I will soon forget the smell released as I and a few others pitchforked a twenty-foot-long, four-foot-high mass of goat manure, straw, and kitchen compost to a new location to help it aerate.

I did not actually mind doing these forms of work, as they were a change from my normal routine and I learned a great deal. But I did come to appreciate just how labour-intensive and knowledge-intensive farming can be, particularly when it involves trying to foster a more biologically diverse, ecologically benign farm. Small-scale farmers, I came to realize, are constantly running (often literally) from task to task in an effort to keep on top of the various activities that demand their
attention: manual weeding, harvesting produce, feeding livestock, managing pests, irrigating crops, adding fertility to fields, and more. This is not to mention the other forms of trouble-shooting that come with running a business, including marketing; accounting; engaging with clientele; managing employees; and transporting foods to retailers, to restaurants, or directly to customers. It is no wonder that during my time in Saguenay I saw something that I would come to witness on many other occasions while visiting farms: the look on a farmer’s face of overwhelming fatigue. There are many upsides of operating or working at an ‘ecological’ farm—a term I use to refer generally to organic and other agricultural practices that minimize the use of fossil fuels and chemical inputs.¹ The benefits of working on this type of farm can range from access to delicious, fresh food to the camaraderie experienced while working with others in a beautiful setting. But it can also be a gruelling affair.

I was interested in coming to understand such realities of farm life, and literally getting my hands dirty for a change, because there are clearly practical and political reasons why ecological agriculture is marginal in the Canadian context—and yet this is a sector that has the potential to contribute significantly to the fight against climate change. While pipeline politics, energy systems and fossil-fuel extractive industries tend to take centre stage in climate change discourses, it is often overlooked that the global food system is responsible for 19 to 29 percent of greenhouse gas emissions (Vermeulen et al. 2012). Of these emissions, 80 to 86 percent are directly or indirectly tied to food production itself (ibid.). It therefore behooves academics and activists to try to understand agriculture better—and to investigate how ecological farming can help mitigate climate change.

Developing a thorough understanding of agriculture may seem like a daunting task given that 83 percent of Canadians live in cities and more than 99 percent are not farmers (Statistics Canada

¹ I further discuss definitions of ecological farming below, in Section 1.3.
Indeed, the majority of urbanites (and many rural people) are likely to experience food procurement through the process of visiting a grocery store or restaurant, with relatively little awareness of the power relations, dense and spatially extensive commodity supply networks, and socio-ecological processes that go into making that food available for purchase. To be sure, many Canadians are increasingly demonstrating that they are interested in eating local or organic foods (COTA 2017a), likely because have some awareness of relevant issues, yet labels such as these tell us surprisingly little about the politics of our food and agricultural systems (Getz and Shreck 2006; Johnston et al. 2009). If we are concerned about climate change, is it enough to buy local and organic foods? What if we have to choose between local and organic? And are these even the right questions to be asking?

Many scholars and activists argue that we need to move beyond such questions that focus on individualized approaches and responsible consumption. One group that is arguing for a more politicized response to the intertwined food and climate crises taking place around the globe is La Vía Campesina, the international movement of peasants, small-scale farmers, and fisherfolk. This movement is proposing that food sovereignty and agroecology are two interwoven concepts that can help resolve the crises that are occurring. Food sovereignty refers to “the fundamental right of all peoples, nations and states to control food and agricultural systems and policies, ensuring every one has adequate, affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food. This requires the right to define and control our methods of production, transformation, [and] distribution both at the local and international levels” (LVC 2013). Agroecology, on the other hand, is a methodology and framework that stretches well beyond ‘ecological’ farming. In the words of La Vía Campesina, agroecology is:

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2 For background information on La Vía Campesina see, e.g., Desmarais (2007), Martinez-Torres and Rosset (2010), Rosset (2011), Wittman (2009), and Wittman et al. (2010).
a social and ecological system encompassing a great diversity of technologies and practices that are culturally and geographically rooted. It removes dependencies on agro-toxins, reject[s] confined industrial animal production, uses renewable energies, and guarantees healthy food. It enhances dignity, honours traditional knowledge and restores the health and integrity of the land. …Agroecology defends biodiversity, cools down the planet and protects our soils. [This] agricultural model not only can feed all of humanity but is also the way to stop the advance of the climate crisis through local production in harmony with our forests and waterways, enhancing diversity and returning organic matter to natural cycles. (ibid.)

These definitions are both positive and provocative, and given that La Vía Campesina, through its member organizations, reportedly represents over 200 million peasants and small-scale farmers (LVC 2018a), there is reason to pay close attention to these struggles for food sovereignty and agroecology. However, significant political questions persist in terms of how a movement focused on these concepts can advance through practice in the instantiation of an alternative food system in Canada. The fundamental problem facing proponents of food sovereignty and agroecology in this country is that it is unclear how practical actions and advocacy may bring about the necessary changes that will contribute to the realization of these concepts. Are systemic changes required in terms of the broader context of capitalist production? What, in fact, is the relationship between specific initiatives for food sovereignty or agroecology and the political economic system now dominant in Canada and beyond? Is it possible to significantly advance the goals of food sovereignty and agroecology in the absence of system change, and in what ways does the broader context delay or prevent these goals from being realized?

As I discuss below, an additional tension concerns the fact that climate change requires an urgent response, yet the fossil-fuel-intensive food system that dominates in Canada was developed over the span of decades, and as a result of very deliberate processes and policies. How, therefore, are key activists within the movement for food sovereignty to bring about changes in the food and agricultural system expeditiously, particularly if that system is so enmeshed in the broader
functioning of the capitalist economy? The challenge this question raises is not only economic in nature. It is also cultural. Does capitalist hegemony not shape and constrain the scope of imagined alternatives in the agricultural sector and in the food system more generally? The above-mentioned notion that responsible consumption practices and individual behaviours can adequately change the food system suggests that these sensibilities are indeed prevalent within the existing hegemony (see Guthman 2007). It is worth contemplating then, exactly how social groups in Canada set about to “globalize the struggle, [and] globalize the hope,” as per La Vía Campesina’s rallying cry,3 as they strive to advance a politics of food sovereignty and agroecology.

In this dissertation, I will unveil how these concepts are (and are not) being taken up by Canadian farmers, farmers’ organizations and others who have a stake in climate change debates. Based on two years of scholar-activist-oriented research, including interviews with farmers and ethnographic engagements on farms and at events focused on agricultural politics and practices, I describe the opportunities and constraints for agroecological approaches to contribute to mitigating climate change, as well as the significant political, geographical and socio-cultural challenges that are generally inhibiting the actualization of food sovereignty in Canada. Focusing on the work of La Vía Campesina’s two member organizations in this country, the National Farmers Union (NFU) and Union Paysanne, I am concerned with the basic problem described above, regarding how tensions between systemic and pragmatic changes are articulated through agroecology initiatives and food sovereignty advocacy. My essential claim is that a broad counterhegemonic movement will be required in order for there to be a significant shift in climate and food politics in Canada. Food sovereignty and agroecology have the potential to be incorporated into a system change agenda, I argue, but any serious effort to move them forward, and tackle climate change, will require

3 See https://viacampesina.org
confronting capitalism itself. I do not suggest that this will necessarily require overt anticapitalist campaigns, but rather that farmers and other food sovereignty proponents will do well to grapple with the structural constraints within capitalism, while finding ways to talk about and pursue radical change through ostensibly more prosaic initiatives. As part of the counterhegemonic shift I am pointing to, I also argue that farmers’ organizations will need to prioritize both strategic alliance-building with various groups, as well as political education activities that can help both farmers and non-farmers make progress on these fronts, disrupting apolitical approaches to climate and food issues.

In this chapter, after discussing the geographies and politics of climate change in relation to agriculture, I will describe La Vía Campesina’s work to promote food sovereignty as a solution that will help reduce greenhouse gas emissions globally. I then turn to a discussion of the movement’s member organizations in Canada and the state of ecological farming nationally, before describing popular perceptions of climate change and food issues as reflected by the work of environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) in this country. I conclude by fully articulating the research questions that have motivated this dissertation, laying out how I will address them in subsequent chapters.

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*Climate injustice and food regimes*

It is worth giving pause when using the term ‘crisis’ with regard to climate change and food issues, and there are two key reasons for this. The first concerns the fact that the word may unintentionally evoke the kind of apocalyptic imagery that is common in so many dystopian Hollywood movies of
recent years (Žižek 2011). These kinds of apolitical narratives are likely to suggest either (a) that nothing can be done about a crisis situation because the problem is far too severe to be reversed, or, (b) in contrast, that the word ‘crisis’ seems overly dramatic for those of us who are carrying on with our daily lives, unimpeded by rising global temperatures. (After all, there are still grocery stores with shelves full of food in cities like the one I live in—and there is no need to fight through rioting crowds and break windows to get to that food.)

On this point, the second reason to carefully consider the use of the term ‘crisis’ has to do with the fact that we do not all experience the consequences of climate change equally. Advocates of climate justice draw attention to the disproportionate impacts that an increase in atmospheric temperatures is having on those who have contributed the least to anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions historically (Bond 2012; Lohmann 2008, 2009). As various scholars have noted (Malm 2016; cf. Hoffman 2011; Klein 2014), the root causes of climate change originate significantly in a dependence on fossil fuels and in the high-consumption lifestyles for the world’s most affluent people that have been propelled by industrial capitalist development over the last two centuries. Industrial capitalism has largely taken place in the global north, and benefitted residents and corporations situated there, while countries of the global south have for the most part been intentionally ‘underdeveloped,’ seeing their natural resources and agricultural products exported to wealthier, more powerful countries (Frank 1989; cf. Bond 2012; Robbins 2012: Ch. 13). In recent years then, it has been the world’s poorer countries—many still reeling from the ongoing consequences of extractive capitalism and colonialism—that have been facing the most stark realities of climate change. Reports have estimated that deaths occurring every year that are attributable to climate change range from the tens of thousands to 350,000, with virtually all of these deaths occurring in the global south (DARA 2010; WHO 2018; cf. Kovats, Campbell-Lendrum and
Matthies 2005). And when lives are not lost, livelihoods may be. While no one meteorological event can be linked to climate change with certainty, scientists are demonstrating that weather patterns are becoming more severe and less predictable (ibid; cf. IPCC 2014), meaning that some of the world’s most marginalized people will continue to lose their homes to tropical storms, see their harvests wiped out by droughts, or witness their communities’ infrastructures destroyed by floods (ibid.; cf. Parenti 2011).

In wealthier countries such as Canada, we have generally not been experiencing extreme scenarios reminiscent of dystopian science fiction films, but that is beginning to change. In just the last several years we have seen wildfires devastate huge swaths of forests and cause many to evacuate their homes; severe flooding has overwhelmed both urban and rural communities following remarkably heavy rains; and extreme droughts that were once rare events have sent farmers scrambling in an effort to save their harvests (see, e.g. AAFC 2015; Prairie Climate Centre 2018). Indeed, farmers are likely to be paying attention to these changes more so than most Canadians. As one Quebecois vegetable grower suggested to me while gesturing out his kitchen window, this is because farmers “do not control the conditions of production”4 that regulate their operations. He made this remark during eastern Canada’s prolonged drought of the summer of 2016, which compelled farmers I spoke with to take up measures such as trucking in water to fill empty wells, or expanding irrigation systems at great expense and effort. “The biggest change that’s become more and more common is …the unpredictability,” said one southwestern Ontario farmer about her experiences with the changing climate; “Weather was never predictable, but it’s more unpredictable [now] …And it’s the big rain events. Torrential rains have become much more common. So, …it can lead to some major consequences …where things get wiped out by too much rain in a very short period, and, you know,

months of work can just literally float away” (Interview, Dec. 9, 2015) (see also MacRae and Beard 2015).

Thus, although Canadian farmers have not been experiencing the impacts of climate change to the same extent as peasants and other small-scale producers of the global south, they are likely to increasingly understand and experience the issues because agriculture depends on the climate (FAO 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Porter et al. 2014). Yet it is also worth considering how the industrial model of agriculture that is dominant in Canada has helped shape the climate by contributing to global greenhouse gas emissions. As Darrin Qualman (2011: 36) has documented, in the last hundred years or so, the Canadian agricultural model has shifted from one that was solar powered to one that is petroleum powered:

\[\text{A century ago, Canadian farms were powered by horses that derived their energy from grass, hay and grain which, in turn, was created largely out of sunlight [whereas today] our farms… emit large quantities of greenhouse gasses… [as they] have been increasing output (at least partly) by increasing their use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers, largely derived from fossil fuels.}\]

As a result, Qualman (2018) estimates, our food system is now turning fossil-fuel calories into food calories at a ratio of 13.3:1. This is a remarkable figure when considering that mainstream discourses often posit contemporary agriculture as unquestionably efficient, and less mechanized and less input-reliant peasant and traditional farming systems as woefully inefficient (Qualman 2011).

Statistics from the most recent national Agricultural Census are also worth considering. In 1871 there were three times more horses in Canadian agriculture than there were in 2016. We have seen a shift “from horses to horsepower” as the average Canadian farm now relies on equipment and machinery valued at $278,405 (Statistics Canada 2017c), much of it powered by fossil fuels. In that same time period, the average farm area in cropland has increased from 33 acres to 483 acres (13.4
ha to 195.5 ha), and Canada now has 14 times as much wheat, 10 times as many pigs, and 5 times as many cattle as it did in 1871 (ibid.). From a climate change standpoint, the dramatic increase in the number of pigs and cattle is significant given that an estimated 14.5 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions are tied to animal agriculture, particularly through Intensive Livestock Operations (ILOs) (Gerber et al. 2013; cf. Weis 2013). Beef and “feedlot type” operations are in fact the second most common type of agricultural operations in Canada (at 18.6 percent), behind oilseed and grain farms, which represent 32.9 percent of operations (Statistics Canada 2017d). There are, of course, regional variations in production types: in Ontario and Quebec, where I focused my research, the top agricultural commodities are dairy, grains and oilseeds (for the former), and dairy and hogs (for the latter) (AAFC 2017a, 2017b).

Regional variations notwithstanding, Canada is firmly entrenched in what is known as the industrial grain-oilseed-livestock complex (Weis 2007, 2017). This complex refers to the monocultural systems dominant in temperate climates that primarily produce grains (mostly maize and wheat), oilseeds (canola or rapeseed), soybeans (especially for animal feed), and genetically uniform livestock species (pigs, poultry and cattle) that are raised in high-density factory farms (Weis 2017: 121). These products make up the bulk of Canada’s agricultural exports (63.7 percent), and this country exports over half of its agricultural products by value (AAFC 2017b: 50-52). It is therefore important to recognize how Canada’s energy-intensive agricultural production is caught up in global, profit-oriented systems of food trade and governance.

From a historical perspective, Canada’s involvement in the industrial grain-oilseed-livestock complex is the result of the development of *food regimes* that have profoundly shaped the food system globally since the late 19th Century. Friedmann and McMichael (1989; cf. Friedmann 2005, 2016; McMichael
2009, 2013) established the notion of a food regime, defined as a “rule-governed structure of production and consumption of food on a world scale” (Friedmann 1993: 30-31). They identified two main regimes, in place from 1870 to 1914 and from 1947 to 1973, which were interrupted by periods of crisis and instability in food system governance. Canada was implicated in both regimes. To summarize, the first food regime was marked by Britain’s dominance as a colonial power, and after it removed tariffs on grain imports in the early 1840s, it promoted a world market in wheat and, in particular, grain production in colonies such as Canada. The development of railway infrastructure, and the encouragement of migration (i.e. settler colonialism) as a means to contribute to a specialized labour force in agriculture, were part and parcel of this regime. In the second food regime, under the United States’ hegemony, agricultural production was enmeshed in the ‘development project,’ as countries such as the U.S., Canada and others in Europe sought to gain market power and political influence in the ‘Third World’ following World War II. Direct subsidies, price supports, import controls and other programs, along with increasingly industrialized agricultural methods, allowed wealthier countries to ship their surpluses to newly independent nation-states of the global south, often in the guise of food aid (ibid.).

Although this food regime unravelled following the oil price crisis of 1973, Canada has persisted with its productivist, export-oriented approach to agriculture, which continues to be buoyed by state support. Government intervention in the agricultural sector has in fact been prominent since the early the 20th century, for example through the establishment of the Canadian Wheat Board in 19355 and supply-managed sectors in the early 1970s (see Desmarais and Wittman 2014; Mount 2017; Troughton 1989). Specific initiatives such as the creation of the Agricultural Stabilization Board (in

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5 The Canadian Wheat Board was a mainstay of collective grain marketing for decades, but was dismantled under Canada’s conservative government in 2012, with its assets being subsequently sold off to a private conglomerate (see Fridell 2013; Magnan 2011; Wiebe 2017).
1958), which was designed to protect farmers against fluctuations in commodity market prices, had the effect of promoting monocultural crop production, while the Farm Credit Act of 1959 encouraged the mechanization and growth in size of farms ("Agriculture and Food Policy" n.d.; Skogstad 1987, 2008; Wilson 1990). Similarly, the Agricultural and Rural Development Act (of 1960) and the Fund for Rural Economic Development (created in 1966) were geared toward making farms more competitive, which also increased the use of on-farm machinery and chemical inputs, and effectively drove many smaller-scale farms out of business, while consolidated, better capitalized farms and corporations increased their hold on the sector (ibid.). The 1969 report of the Federal Task Force on Agriculture was a deliberate call for a continuation of these trends, suggesting that the number of family farmers be reduced by two-thirds in order for agriculture to ‘modernize’ through economies of scale; and, although the government ignored the report’s recommendation to phase out subsidies and price supports, it certainly continued to facilitate farm consolidation and the industrialization of agriculture generally ("Federal Task Force on Agriculture" n.d.; Federal Task Force on Agriculture 1969; cf. Troughton 1985). Today, although state support in agriculture is different from the direct farm subsidies made available in the U.S., the Canadian government is spending considerable sums on program payments, discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, that tend to benefit farm operations with the largest volume of production (see Wiebe 2017). In total, as of the 2016-2017 fiscal year, federal and provincial expenditures on the agriculture and agri-food sector was $5.4 billion, and program payments to producers accounted for the largest single share of this amount (39.2 percent) (AAFC 2017b: 105-108).

6 Similarly, in Quebec, the government-initiated Héon Commission had released a report in 1955 calling for the disappearance of 100,000 of the province’s over 140,000 farms (Bouchard 2002, 30). According to the Commission’s analysis, Quebec’s farms would need to consolidate, specialize, and mechanize in order to be competitive in the ongoing transition to industrial agriculture (ibid.).
7 Other spending areas include research and innovation, operating and capital, rural and market development, and safety and control measures (AAFC 2017b: 104-115).
Amazingly, research has shown that these kinds of government program supports are contributing significantly to keeping Canada’s conventional farmers afloat. When these supports are removed from the equation, despite farmers receiving approximately $60 billion total in gross revenues in recent years, they are only keeping a small fraction of that—with approximately $50 billion being put toward expenses (see Figure 1.1) (Qualman 2017). Since the late 1980s in fact, agribusiness transnationals have been capturing over 98 percent of gross farm incomes in Canada, as they are selling producers the increasingly expensive seeds, pesticides, fertilizers and farm machinery required to produce food under the purportedly efficient ‘modern’ agricultural system (Qualman 2017, 2018; Wiebe 2017). This points to the reason why some scholars have suggested that we have witnessed the emergence of a ‘corporate food regime,’ marked by a concentrated number of companies controlling the agricultural input market and dominating food processing, while relatively few
retailers hold an oligopoly downstream from the farm (McMichael 2009, 2013; cf. Friedmann 2016). With provincial and federal governments in Canada deliberately maintaining a policy approach that has favoured this system for decades it is clear that even industrial farmers are trapped in the energy-intensive and productivist agricultural model I have been describing. Between financial precarity and increasingly unpredictable climate patterns, it seems evident that virtually all Canadian farmers could benefit from a profound systemic change in the way food production is organized in this country.

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1.2 - Small-scale sustainable farmers are cooling down the earth

Food sovereignty and climate change

Since it was formed in 1993, La Vía Campesina has been at the forefront of struggles against the corporate food regime. Under the banner of food sovereignty, the movement has been demanding that the power of transnational agribusiness companies be dismantled, and that neoliberal capitalist approaches to international trade—such as those encapsulated by the World Trade Organization’s (WTO’s) Agreement on Agriculture—be replaced with fairer trade practices (Desmarais 2007; cf. Edelman et al. 2014). La Vía Campesina has also rallied against Structural Adjustment Programs, Poverty Reduction Strategies, and the similar euphemistically named programs that have emerged more recently that have compromised many countries’ abilities to feed their populations, while export-oriented, specialized agriculture has been promoted as a route to so-called development.

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8 International donors and lenders, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, often require Poverty Reduction Strategies as a condition of poorer countries receiving aid. As Torrez (2011) notes, peasant groups worldwide have critiqued these strategies as they often fail to appreciate the realities of land-related struggles in specific contexts, and La Vía Campesina has proposed other models of pro-poor agrarian reform and approaches to poverty reduction.
(ibid.). The fact that La Vía Campesina has been able to bring together organizations of peasants and farmers facing similar struggles worldwide has led to considerable growth within the movement. While it consisted of 55 organizations from 36 countries when it was established (LVC 1993), the network now boasts 182 member organizations and spans 81 countries (LVC 2018a). La Vía Campesina has also come to be recognized as a reputable and mobilized collective by intergovernmental institutions such as the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

As far as its organizing on climate change issues goes, La Vía Campesina started in earnest in 2007. That year, the movement coordinated a presence at the United Nations climate change negotiations taking place in Bali, Indonesia (COP13, the thirteenth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, UNFCCC) (Lang 2012; cf. Bello 2007). Since then, La Vía Campesina has participated in summits and civil society counter-summits in conjunction with UN COP meetings every year, in addition to a host of other international events (see Table 1). At these gatherings, the movement has iteratively defined its demands for food sovereignty and agroecology—consistently noting the links between the two concepts—and, at UN meetings, drawing the connections between these demands and climate justice. Notably, in 2009 La Vía Campesina released a document entitled, Small-scale sustainable farmers are cooling down the Earth (LVC 2009). The document positions food sovereignty and agroecology as key strategies that can help with mitigating global greenhouse gas emissions, noting that “industrial agriculture is a major contributor to global warming and climate change” through:

- “transporting food all around the world…
- imposing industrial forms of production (mechanization, intensification, use of agrochemicals, monoculture…)
- destroying biodiversity and its capacity to capture carbon…
• converting land and forest areas into non-agricultural areas… [and]
• transforming agriculture from an energy producer into an energy consumer’’ (ibid. 3-5).

La Vía Campesina asserts that peasant and small-scale agroecological farming can reverse these trends by: conserving soils and building organic matter as a means to sequester carbon; integrating livestock rearing with crops (instead of having this take place in ILOs); supporting markets focused on fresh, local food; and halting land-clearing and deforestation (ibid. 14-17). The movement notes that more food will need to be grown to feed people rather than for agrofuel production or for livestock feed, suggesting (1) that we will need to find other alternatives to help us reduce our reliance on fossil fuels in the transportation sector, and (2) that meat consumption will need to be reduced globally (ibid.; cf. Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2010; Weis 2013).

Several scholars and research groups have supported the claims that La Vía Campesina makes in its ‘Cooling Down the Earth’ document (Lin et al. 2011; Martínez-Alier 2011; Rosset 2011), and since its release the movement has been taking this message to UN climate change meetings around the world (see Russell, Pusey and Sealey-Huggins 2012). As noted in Table 1-1, however, the key COP meetings have resulted in failure in recent years, with governments of some of the highest emitting countries resisting firm commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and balking at calls for substantial financial contributions that would level the playing field for underdeveloped countries of the global south (see Bond 2012; Campbell 2016; Geden 2016). Accordingly, La Vía Campesina has adopted an ‘inside-outside’ strategy at meetings such as these, attempting to have their voice heard within the formal meetings, but often spending more energy collaborating with civil society organizations to protest the approaches taken by governments and international institutions, and to establish alliances based on common analyses of the structural problems at hand.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>International Food Sovereignty Forum</td>
<td>Nyéléni, Mali</td>
<td>First forum of this kind to be organized by La Via Campesina (LVC) and allies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COP13</td>
<td>Bali, Indonesia</td>
<td>LVC’s first notable presence at a UNFCCC COP meeting.</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>LVC’s 5th International Conference</td>
<td>Maputo, Mozambique</td>
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<td></td>
<td>COP14</td>
<td>Poznan, Poland</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>COP15</td>
<td>Copenhagen, Denmark</td>
<td>Conference was meant to establish post-Kyoto Protocol framework, however it ended in failure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth</td>
<td>Cochabamba, Bolivia</td>
<td>Conference supported by Bolivian president, Evo Morales.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COP16</td>
<td>Cancún, Mexico</td>
<td>LVC calls for ‘Thousands of Cancúns’ to be organized around the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>COP17</td>
<td>Durban, South Africa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Rio+20</td>
<td>Rio de Janeiro, Brazil</td>
<td>(Counter-summit attended by author.)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COP18</td>
<td>Doha, Qatar</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>LVC’s 6th International Conference</td>
<td>Jakarta, Indonesia</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COP19</td>
<td>Warsaw, Poland</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>International Symposium on Agroecology</td>
<td>Rome, Italy</td>
<td>Symposium convened by the FAO.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COP20</td>
<td>Lima, Peru</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>International Forum on Agroecology</td>
<td>Nyéléni, Mali</td>
<td>Forum organized by LVC.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COP21</td>
<td>Paris, France</td>
<td>Paris Agreement established, lacking in firm targets or enforcement mechanisms.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>COP22</td>
<td>Marrakech, Morocco</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>LVC’s 7th International Conference</td>
<td>Derio, Basque Country (Spain)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COP23</td>
<td>Bonn, Germany</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Second International Symposium on Agroecology</td>
<td>Rome, Italy</td>
<td>Symposium convened by the FAO.</td>
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</table>

*Table 1-1:* Select international events organized or attended by La Via Campesina (LVC) since 2007. COP meetings (shaded) refer to the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the UNFCCC (see United Nations Climate Change 2018).
The Rio+20 summit held in June 2012, held on the occasion of the twenty-year anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit, exemplified the inside-outside approach. In attending the counter-summit held in parallel with the Rio+20 meeting while conducting my Master’s research, I saw La Vía Campesina members from around the world spend considerable energy on education efforts, alliance building and public protest, while some delegates also participated in the formal UN meetings in an effort to convey their proposals for addressing climate change, biodiversity loss and other socio-ecological problems (see Dale 2013; cf. Meek 2015a). The tension with the approach, my research experiences revealed, is that La Vía Campesina risks having its critiques of the formal UN processes ignored, while its selective participation in such events may indirectly contribute to the co-optation of the concepts that the movement is trying to promote (see also Friedmann 2005). As some scholars have observed (e.g., Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013), agroecology is particularly susceptible to being co-opted by international institutions, and the FAO’s recent interest in the topic has been noted for its selective adoption of certain aspects of agroecology at the expense of the more political demands that La Vía Campesina associates with agroecology (LVC 2015, 2018b; cf. Nicholls 2014).

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Counteracting ‘green’ capitalism and false solutions

Anticipating and attempting to prevent the co-optation of concepts like agroecology has actually been a key aspect of La Vía Campesina’s struggles in recent years. More broadly, the movement has also been speaking out against what it refers to as the ‘false solutions’ to problems such as climate change and world hunger—from carbon offset markets to ‘climate smart’ agriculture (see LVC 2012a; cf. Robbins 2012). At Rio+20, with terms such as ‘the green economy,’ ‘payments for

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9 The Rio Earth Summit was formally known as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, whereas Rio+20 was also known as the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development.
ecosystem services’ and ‘natural capital’ being circulated by actors involved in the official summit negotiations (see MacDonald and Corson 2012; Wilshusen and MacDonald 2017), La Vía Campesina was forthright in its scepticism about approaches that would attempt to merely reform capitalism or, further, align capitalism with sustainability without addressing socio-ecological exploitation and appropriation. In the words of Di Chiro (2011: 233), this was a response to the fact that “the mainstream focus on ‘sustainability’ tends to have a limited agenda: a consumerist, carbon-footprint-reducing, green lifestyles agenda that all too often turns a blind eye to the environmental injustices and health disparities facing low income and poor communities around the world.”

Indeed, in advance of the Rio+20 summit, La Vía Campesina insisted that international actors and UN agencies “stop trying to save capitalism” (LVC 2011), elaborating that:

[The] green economy is nothing more than a green mask for capitalism. It is also a new mechanism to appropriate our forests, rivers, land…our territories! …Investment capital now seeks new markets through the “green economy,” securing the natural resources of the world as primary inputs and commodities for industrial production, as carbon sinks, or even for speculation. This is being demonstrated by increasing land grabs globally, for crop production for both export and agrofuels… We reject the “Green Economy” as it is pushed now in the Rio+20 process. (LVC 2012b)

The statement released by the movement following the summit also insisted that “food sovereignty is not possible within capitalism” (LVC 2012c), and La Vía Campesina has continued to articulate these kinds of explicitly anticapitalist sentiments since. For example, at its 7th International Conference that took place in the Basque Country in July 2017, the gathering was described as a chance for “peasants from around the world [to discuss] the unique challenges they are faced with while building a counter-narrative to capitalism and neoliberalism” and, more broadly, it was noted that this would be a chance for members to engage in “rich exchanges offered in [the] fight against patriarchy and capitalism, and [concerning] the alternatives offered by feminist struggles” (LVC 2017: 10). These references are noteworthy not only because they are reflective of the critiques of
capitalism that continue to frequently punctuate La Vía Campesina’s press releases and reports, but also because they suggest (1) that the movement is interested in promoting alternatives to capitalism and not just critiquing it, and (2) that these efforts are relational, with struggles for feminism, for example, accompanying struggles for food sovereignty.

When I conducted interviews with La Vía Campesina members in 2012, representatives of organizations from Guatemala to Mali agreed with these critiques and approaches (Dale 2013). In the words of one peasant and organizer from Spain:

There are alternatives to capitalism. … We resist capitalism because we’re working towards a more sustainable mode of agricultural production. Specifically we’re working towards a model that is a more sustainable way of producing food that incorporates a close relationship between farmers and consumers, citizens. These alternatives can help combatting climate change. (Interview, Oct. 8, 2012).10

This member was adamant that food sovereignty is incompatible with capitalism, just as a La Vía Campesina representative from India indicated that she felt the two are contradictory to each other [given that] capitalism seeks to privatize nature and exploit it for profit, while food sovereignty seeks to have community control for natures and human well-being. All the major resources like land, biodiversity, water, etc. need to be commonly controlled according to food sovereignty, and to be privatized in capitalism. I think there can be food sovereignty-oriented policies and examples within a capitalist system, but to have real food sovereignty, the capitalist system will have to go. (Interview, Oct. 24, 2012)

Responses such as these are remarkable in that they demonstrate a linking of particular struggles (including over specific practices of agricultural production) to general, systemic struggles (i.e. confronting capitalism and patriarchy). La Vía Campesina’s approach to the problem of climate change is thus distinct from many mainstream approaches in that it analytically connects a range of global issues—from food trade to biodiversity loss—while seeking to highlight the root causes of

10 Interviews conducted in Spanish and Portuguese were simultaneously translated by colleagues of the author.
problems that UN agencies and the governments of capitalist countries appear utterly unwilling to acknowledge.

At the same time, the movement is focused on grassroots, collective efforts and solutions, in contrast to both top-down initiatives to advance international climate governance and individualistic responses such as eco-consumerism. These grassroots solutions, I discovered, are also notable for having been established through horizontal, deliberative processes that La Vía Campesina fosters at both international meetings and within its regions. For instance, interviewees I spoke with in 2012 indicated that they were unaware of any dissensus around the analysis and solutions proposed within the movement’s ‘Cooling Down the Earth’ document (Dale 2013). This is important given that La Vía Campesina, since its foundation, has sought to represent “unity within diversity” among its varied member organizations from around the world (Desmarais 2007; cf. Patel 2010).

In practice, it evidently takes considerable time and energy to arrive at decisions and statements that are satisfactory for peasant and farm organizations based in quite distinct geographical and cultural contexts globally. Ideas are regularly exchanged between dispersed members of organizations and La Vía Campesina’s elected regional representatives who sit on its International Coordinating Committee (ICC) (Dale 2013: Ch. 4). “It’s a two-way street. We’re engaged in an ongoing dialogue… a dialectical process,” stated a member from Brazil (Interview, July 7, 2012), while a peasant from Panama similarly insisted that, “Vía Campesina doesn’t need intellectuals to propose ideas and to investigate solutions. These come from communities… [from the] people who are in the struggle—the campesinos and indigenous people… in each region” (Interview, June 22, 2012). Much of these deliberations and exchanges take place via conference calls and through local and regional organizing, however La Vía Campesina also coordinates larger meetings that culminate in its
international conferences approximately every four years. Speaking to these international meetings, a farmer from Ontario, Canada had this to share about her experiences regarding the movement’s horizontal organizing:

Vía Campesina to me is a beautiful picture of chaos in a sense. You’ve got multiple languages, multiple cultures, multiple countries represented... multiple realities. And you bring it all together often in really inadequate situations, where we have our technical support people who are struggling with ridiculous conditions and insecure power supply, and we have volunteer translators... [But] the technical people do what they need to do and then the meeting just comes together... [We] have a process and it’s very democratic and people are courageous and will speak out if they don’t feel the process is reflecting gender equity, for example, or is not fair. [These meetings] go on deep into the night until everybody’s had their say, and then the documents are reviewed by everybody... These are consensus documents... and if something is not reflected in the document there’s a very good rationale for why it’s not reflected in the document. (Interview, Oct. 31, 2012)

The effort put into such forms of collaboration stand in stark contrast to the feigned participatory and inclusive processes that take place at many UN conferences, many of which have been captured by wealthy elites and corporations (see Bond 2012; Ribot 2007). The difficulty with La Vía Campesina’s horizontal organizing, however, lies in the fact that it, along with its member organizations, has very limited financial resources with which to mobilize peasants and farmers around the world, and to respond to ongoing challenges. While the movement’s global scope allows opportunities for members to connect with others from around the world as a means to identify common problems and shared solutions, in practice struggles that are localized and particular to a given context also need to be supported, which can seem nearly impossible on a shoestring budget (see Desmarais and Nicholson 2013). At the same time, while there can be much to gain from participating in La Vía Campesina events, due to logistical and financial constraints, relatively few peasants and farmers will ever get to do so. This begs the question, for example, of how many Canadian members will have the chance to engage in activities that a farmer from Saskatchewan described as “very complex and very necessary” because they challenge the “Western style mindset
[that is based on...] a dis-integrated view to how we think about who we are [while La Vía Campesina’s approach can help] us in industrialized countries to imagine what food sovereignty looks like [and] to imagine how we achieve food sovereignty” (Interview, June 23, 2012).

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1.3 - Ecological farming and food sovereignty in Canada

The National Farmers Union and Union Paysanne

When it comes to imagining how to achieve food sovereignty in Canada, this country’s member organizations of La Vía Campesina are, naturally, playing a lead role. That is why, for this research project, I have focused on the work of the National Farmers Union (NFU) and Union Paysanne (the ‘peasant union’). The NFU is older of the two organizations, having been formed in 1969. That year, at a meeting in Winnipeg, Manitoba, farmers from provinces across Canada came together to establish a national body that would aggregate existing unions from around the country: the Ontario Farmers Union, the Saskatchewan Farmers Union, the Farmers Union of British Columbia, and the Farmers Union of Alberta. On top of these provincial organizations, farmers from the Maritime Provinces that had not previously been organized into unions also joined the NFU (NFU 2009; cf. Dodds and Forsey 2009).

Many of the efforts of those early provincially based unions revolved around uniting farmers who were concerned about falling net incomes and general hardship in rural areas. They worked toward the cooperative marketing of agricultural commodities, agitated for governments to assure farmers’ revenues would be protected from the vagaries of the market, and put considerable effort into
educating and politically mobilizing members (ibid.). However, with federal policies increasingly affecting agricultural livelihoods by encouraging farm consolidation and agrarian industrialization (as outlined above), by the late 1960s the regional unions realized that they would have more leverage by collaborating as a national organization. Following the formation of the NFU, it was incorporated through an Act of Parliament in June 1970, “completing the shift from provincial to national focus and beginning a new chapter in farmers’ movement history” (Dodds and Forsey 2009: 51).

Farm organizing in Quebec, on the other hand, took a different course. The Union catholique des cultivateurs (UCC, the Catholic Farmers Union), established in 1924, was a unifying force for the province’s farmers, but was succeeded in 1972 by the Union des producteurs agricoles (UPA, the ‘Agricultural Producers Union’). This transition was motivated by a desire to ‘modernize’ agriculture and distance the union from the Church and connotations of an antiquated institutional heritage and economic framework (Morisset 2010). Although UPA for a time resisted the ongoing pressure to fully shift toward export-oriented and productivist agriculture—advocating for the continued importance of ‘self-sufficiency’ by having farmers ‘feed Quebec’—these efforts ultimately failed. In 1993, in the context of free trade negotiations that would have a direct impact on agriculture (i.e. the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA, and the WTO’s Agreement on Agriculture), UPA elected a new president, Laurent Pellerin, who was a producer representing the pork sector, the form of production most integrated into the flows of global trade. Pellerin soon facilitated a clear change in direction toward commodity specialization and export production (ibid.). While there continued to be diversity within UPA’s ranks, its more powerful, conventional farmers won out, perhaps motivated by the fear of being left behind in the midst of sweeping economic changes and increased trade in agricultural commodities.
However, by the late 1990s, a cross section of the rural population was opposed to industrial agriculture to an unprecedented extent, motivating a group of farmers and non-farmers to come together in 1999 to form the *Coalition Sauver les campagnes* (the ‘Save the Countryside Coalition’) (Silvestro 2008). At the April 2001 Summit of the Americas in Quebec City, members of this coalition met with representatives of La Vía Campesina, with many Quebec farmers in attendance realizing that they were unique in their lack of an autonomous peasant movement\(^{11}\) (Bouchard 2002). About a month after the summit, the Coalition hosted a meeting at which a provisional committee of Union Paysanne was formed, and in December of the same year the union held its founding convention. Momentum gathered quickly, and within a year Union Paysanne had recruited between 3,000 and 3,500 members, of which approximately one-third were farmers and the remainder were non-farmers (referred to as *membres citoyens* ['citizen members']). This blend within Union Paysanne’s membership helps explains its slogan: ‘L’alliance de la terre et de la table’ (the land-to-table alliance). It is worth noting though that the membership’s composition has shifted over the years: Farmer members, once a minority in the organization, now make up approximately 60 percent of the overall membership.\(^{12}\)

While the NFU had helped form La Vía Campesina in 1993 (Desmarais 2007), Union Paysanne officially became a member in 2004 (Bouchard 2014), and both organizations are helping to promote food sovereignty in Canada (Desmarais and Wittman 2014; Kneen, C. 2011). Both are also interested in encouraging the growth of ecological farming across the country, although there are differences in terms of how the two organizations articulate the issue and work to achieve these ends.

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\(^{11}\) The term ‘peasant’ is a complex one, as discussed in the next section and in Chapter 2.

\(^{12}\) Field notes, Congrès annuel de l’Union paysanne, Montérégie, Quebec, 28 February 2016.
Defining ‘ecological’ farming

For its part, the NFU discusses ‘sustainable’ farming practices. Its Sustainable Agriculture Policy was developed in the mid-1990s and, along with subsequent additions, now spans seven pages of the union’s policy book. The policy covers a range of issues, from economic considerations and trade to food processing and soil management. Notably, the NFU draws attention to the political economic factors, referenced above, that are constraining ecological farming in Canada:

The governments of Canada have surrendered much control over agriculture to transnational corporations. Current government policy, in effect if not intent, is often no more than the promotion of these corporations’ agendas. Unfortunately, the agendas of corporate chemical, fertilizer, processing, distribution, and retailing corporations conflict with the best interests of farmers, farm families, rural communities, as well as with those of consumers. Farmers, farm families, local communities and regions must regain control of food production. The National Farmers Union’s Policy on Sustainable Agriculture and Food Supply will help them do so. It is a document of hope and optimism for the future. (NFU n.d.)

The tone here parallels La Vía Campesina’s discussions of food sovereignty, but it is also important for the NFU to acknowledge the political economic factors at play because the union represents both ‘ecological’ and ‘conventional’ farmers.

These terms, while commonly used among NFU members with whom I spoke, also trouble many farmers who seek to qualify and contextualize such language. An organic vegetable and sheep farmer from southwestern Ontario was clear that she hesitates to regard farming according to binaries:

I actually find it very difficult to draw a line, and put people in boxes. …I’ve spent my life living in a farm community […] and while] I’ve certainly never farmed in the mainstream, doing what my neighbours are doing, …I find that often the way some of us who are farming …either as organic farmers [or] as ‘small’ farmers—we draw boxes and lines that certainly leave out my neighbours. [And…] when it comes to… whatever ‘environmentally

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13 Policy Statement of the National Farmers Union, Adopted by Delegates to the 47th Annual Convention; Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, November 2016 [Internal document]. cf. NFU (n.d.).
sustainable’ means, I think we all tend to think that we’re doing a better job than we are as far as taking care of the environment… [On the] whole… we need to make some changes …in our farming practices, on a large scale, but that’s not just for farmers to do, it’s what society expects from us, what governments and such are pushing us towards. (Interview, Dec. 9, 2015)

The notion of there being room for improvement among farming practices that are considered ecological was also raised by other farmers, and will be discussed further in Chapter 3. However, the converse is also true; with many conventional farmers increasingly experimenting with cover crop ‘cocktails’ and no-till methods,\(^\text{14}\) it may be better to talk about “farmers on the continuum,” as one Ontario dairy farmer put it, “[b]ecause, even among conventional farmers, there are various techniques that can be used that are taking into account the ecology of their farm” (Interview, Jan. 27, 2016). Her spouse added that the mixture of farmers within the NFU can also be beneficial because it “broadens the discussion” and because “more people will end up being exposed to [ecological farming practices] and have a chance to see …how that works, and how it might fit in to what they’re doing. …Conventional farmers have to start somewhere, and get their inspiration, or information …from somewhere, so a mixing of philosophies and approaches can be optimal” (Interview, Jan. 27, 2016).

With these nuances and contextual considerations in mind then, it is understandable that the NFU’s Sustainable Agriculture Policy indicates that:

‘Sustainable agriculture,’ as it is used by the NFU, embraces organic agriculture but also the intermediate steps in the transition from chemical-based, high synthetic-input agriculture to organic. Farmers and consumers would benefit if all agricultural production [were] produced by ecologically sound and sustainable means. However, the NFU recognizes that it may not be possible for all farmers to farm completely organically. (NFU n.d.)

\(^{14}\) As I will discuss in Chapter 3, reducing and avoiding the tillage of soils can have significant environmental benefits; however, if this is achieved simply because farmers are spraying herbicides then the benefits are likely negated. Actors within the agri-chemical industry are known for promoting reduced tillage as an ecological upside of using their pesticides.
What remains to be seen however, is whether the NFU will shift toward the use of the term ‘ecological’ agriculture, as many interviewees I spoke with expressed their preference for such a term and/or a general concern about the ambiguity associated with the word ‘sustainable.’ As a livestock farmer from southwestern Ontario indicated, “The word ‘sustainable’ has been overused. …Like, what does [it] mean anymore? …The word ‘sustainability’ is all over the place. And I think it’s being used in the wrong places, […] so I don’t think people even pay attention to it anymore” (Interview, Oct. 30, 2015). To be sure, it can be argued that the word ‘ecological’ also lacks definition—as every type of farm has an ecology to it—however farmers I spoke with seem to prefer such terminology as it has not been co-opted to the same extent that ‘sustainable’ has.

Union Paysanne, on the other hand, uses the term l’agriculture paysanne (‘peasant agriculture’). In the organization’s statement of founding principles it suggests that this refers to farming practices “that respect soils, animals, the environment and human health,” including raising animals on pasture and protecting biodiversity and water sources (Union Paysanne n.d.). Interestingly, the term ‘peasant’ (paysan/ne) is not generally in use elsewhere in Canada, nor was there a peasant class that existed historically in Quebec (Morissett 2010). The peasantry is typically referred to as a class of smallholder agricultural producers who mix subsistence production with some involvement in markets, and who generally eschew commodity inputs to agriculture (though this is where things can become complicated). They are noted and sometimes defined ontologically by dependence on non-waged labour, frequently mobilizing family members as well as extended kinship and networks of community reciprocity (see Bernstein 2010). It is also fair to say, however, that the word ‘peasant’ has overlapping and inter-related economic, political, and cultural connotations. Union Paysanne’s use of the term ‘peasant’ is a deliberate, political choice—one that was influenced by connections

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15 As discussed in Chapter 2, there have been ongoing debates for over a century about the fate of the peasantry in the midst of an increasingly capitalist agricultural sector.
Peasant agriculture, and more specifically, a commitment to the tenets of food sovereignty, is how Union Paysanne has differentiated itself from UPA. As reflected in its statement of founding principles, since its establishment, Union Paysanne has been interested in these interconnected concepts, expressing a desire to see a more localized food system, increased rural democracy, an economy driven by diversified ‘human-scale’ and family businesses, and the production of healthy food through practices that respect nature (Union Paysanne n.d.). Much of the Union Paysanne’s early organizing was driven by concerns about trends in Quebec agriculture. Campaigning efforts following the union’s formation in 2001 were centred on halting large-scale hog farms that had been rapidly expanding across a number of regions in the province. Rural residents had been speaking out against the localized air and water pollution caused by these industrial-scale operations for some time, but under the leadership of Union Paysanne, farmers and non-farmers were able to come together to pressure the government to introduce a moratorium on the expansion of these ‘mega-farms’ (Guay 2005). As Union Paysanne worked toward building its membership, these examples of advocacy for food sovereignty and peasant agriculture were key to helping it distinguish itself as an alternative to UPA.

It is also worth noting that Union Paysanne has, in recent years, also taken concerted efforts to promote the concept of agroecology. While my research experiences and interviews revealed that this term is generally not well known across Canada (including in Québec), the organization has been increasingly making use of the term, as an articulation of peasant agriculture and food
sovereignty. Most importantly, in 2013 Union Paysanne established the Centre Paysan, which is considered Canada’s first agroecology school, and while it is a ‘school without walls’ that offers workshops on farms and other locations throughout Quebec, it is formally recognized as an agroecology school by La Vía Campesina, joining a network of such institutions around the world (see LVC 2018b).

Nevertheless, most Union Paysanne members are not yet employing the term ‘agroecology,’ and, more generally, farmers and consumers across Canada are much more familiar with the term ‘organic’ agriculture. This is due to the longer history of organic agriculture being established in North America, and working its way into mainstream commodity chains (Guthman 2004). Today in Canada, government statistics and industry reports demonstrate that the sector is growing, having achieved over $5.4 billion in retail sales in 2017, up from $3.5 billion in 2013 (COTA 2017a). Of course, not all of organic food sold in Canada is grown in the country: in 2016, organic food imports were valued at $637 million (COG n.d.). In addition, organic farming remains a relatively small proportion of overall agricultural production. Only 2.2 percent of Canadian farms are offering organic products, including 3,663 certified farms and 769 farms that are transitioning to organic production, for a total of 4,289 out of 193,492 operations (Statistics Canada 2016a). As a proportion of agricultural land, organic production covers approximately 1.5 percent of acreage being farmed across Canada (COTA 2017b). These statistics draw attention to the question of how organic production may be able to overcome the challenges associated with supplanting industrial agriculture, which remains dominant across the country (see Blay-Palmer 2005; MacRae et al. 2009). Additionally, these statistics prompt an interrogation as to the potential value of advancing the

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16 See https://www.centrepaysan.ca/
concept of agroecology when ‘organic’ is the term being marketed most heavily—an issue that I take up in Chapter 3.

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1.4 - Climate change and agriculture in Canada

**ENGOs and public perceptions of the issues**

On top of mainstream perceptions about organic farming in Canada, there are also important points to raise about the extent to which the general public is aware of the connections between climate change and agriculture. Having discussed the political economy of a fossil-fuel intensive food system in this country, and the assertions made by La Vía Campesina that food sovereignty and agroecology can help ‘cool down the Earth,’ it is worth considering the context in which the NFU and Union Paysanne are advocating for a more ecological food production regime. In recent years, climate change discussions in Canadian media and popular discourses have largely revolved around pipeline politics and carbon-pricing schemes (see Dalby 2018; Houle, LaChapelle and Purdon 2015), and the work of environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) nationally reflects these trends.

While these are certainly important issues worthy of debate, there is demonstrable evidence that ENGOs across the country are not substantially engaging with food and agricultural issues in relation to climate change, at least not in a manner that is consistent with food sovereignty. I reached this conclusion by undertaking preliminary research that included a thorough scan of the online presence of Canada’s best-funded environmental charities that work on climate change (see Grandy 2013): the Canadian Wildlife Federation, the Sierra Club Canada Foundation, World Wildlife Fund
(WWF) Canada, the Wilderness Committee, Environmental Defence Canada, and the David Suzuki Foundation. I also looked at Greenpeace Canada (which is not a registered charity) and Friends of the Earth Canada/AmiEs de la Terre de Québec. To conduct this scan, I used the “site:” function to search the entire websites of these organizations\(^{17}\) (in both English and French) for relevant words such as “food”, “aliment*”, “farm*” and “agriculture.”

As summarized in *Table 1-*2, what is demonstrated by an analysis of these ENGOs’ websites is that, generally, they do not thoroughly or frequently engage with agricultural issues in relation to climate change. To varying degrees some of these organizations have engaged with campaigns related to specific food-related topics, with the two most notable examples being genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and pesticides (such as neonicotinoids) that are threatening pollinator populations.\(^{18}\) Indeed, the NFU and Union Paysanne have even partnered on some of these campaigns in recent years (see, e.g., Eaton 2013). Yet, they have been on a time-limited basis, and these ENGOs have engaged less with the question of agriculture and climate change, even though the latter is a primary issue on which they are working. A young NFU member who has worked on various types of farms commented on this matter when she noted that there are environmental organizations that *should* be advocating for agricultural change and aren’t, unless they’re taking a kind of simple animal rights stance of like, “everyone become a vegan” or something. I don’t think that they are really doing a very good job of promoting the type of change that *is* actually [needed] to help mitigate climate change and environmental destruction. …I don’t even know what could be a bigger impact on the environment than human agriculture, right? …And [yet] those organizations don’t seem to pay any attention to it, ever. (Interview, May 28, 2016)

\(^{17}\) For the websites of these organizations (listed in order ENGOs are presented in Table 1-2), see: blog.cwf-fcf.org, sierraclub.ca, wwf.ca, wildernesscommittee.org, environmentaldefence.ca, davidsuzuki.org, greenpeace.org/canada, foecanada.org and atquebec.org.

\(^{18}\) The pollinator typically identified in these campaigns is the honeybee, which seem to have become a new ‘charismatic species’ alongside megafauna like polar bears and caribou. Other bees and the monarch butterfly are also frequently mentioned.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENGO</th>
<th>Work on climate change</th>
<th>Discussion of GMOs / pollinators</th>
<th>Noticeable overlap between climate and food/agriculture?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Wildlife Federation</td>
<td>Focus is on biodiversity and conservation of wildlife habitat. Fair amount of attention paid to COP21 negotiations.</td>
<td>Yes – Pollinators.</td>
<td>No. Discussion on one page of wildlife and Indigenous food provisioning; and links between biodiversity, disappearing farmland and food policy (Callaghan 2017). Some discussion of agriculture as disruptor to animal habitats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Club Canada Foundation</td>
<td>Climate change listed as one of six main issues. Coverage ranges from extractive industries to wildlife.</td>
<td>Yes – Both, with considerable attention paid to GMOs.</td>
<td>No. Launched a ‘Safe Food and Sustainable Agriculture’ program in 1999 (SCC n.d.), however these issues are relatively buried on redesigned website.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Canada</td>
<td>Work on climate change embedded within efforts to conserve species’ habitats.</td>
<td>Yes – Mostly on pollinators.</td>
<td>No. Agriculture not discussed frequently, but framed more as a threat to environments and wildlife. Agriculture also mentioned in passing in strategic plan for 2015 to 2020 (WWF n.d.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilderness Committee</td>
<td>Fighting climate change listed as one of five key campaign areas.</td>
<td>Yes – Mostly on pollinators.</td>
<td>Little. Very limited discussion of agriculture—Mostly passing mentions as opposed to ongoing campaigns. Local food production noted as ‘climate solution’ on one page (Wilderness Committee n.d.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Defence Canada</td>
<td>‘Climate &amp; clean economy’ one of five main issues. Focus is fossil fuel extraction, pipelines and alternatives.</td>
<td>Yes – Both, with slightly more attention paid to pollinators.</td>
<td>Some. Mentions of local food consumption, reduced meat consumption, etc. in relation to climate change. One article makes explicit reference to food production as a climate solution (Kitchin 2018).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Suzuki Foundation</td>
<td>Climate action/solutions one of eleven project areas.</td>
<td>Yes – Pesticides listed as a main project area, plus some work on GMOs.</td>
<td>Some. Responsible consumption encouraged in discussions of climate change and agriculture, with focus on eating meat-free meals, buying organic and local, avoiding food waste and growing one’s own food. Also see Séguin and Benoît (2015) re. discussion of climate change and land grabbing in Quebec.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenpeace Canada</td>
<td>‘Climate and Energy’ is one of five main campaign areas.</td>
<td>Yes – Focus is largely on GMOs, but there is coverage of pollinator issues as well.</td>
<td>Yes, especially online articles in French. Maintains a focus on “Campaigning for sustainable agriculture by rejecting genetically engineered organisms, protecting biodiversity and encouraging socially responsible farming” (Greenpeace Canada, n.d.), however climate connections are often consumption-centred. See also Bellarby et al. (2008).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends of the Earth Canada (FOE) / AmiEs de la Terre de Québec</td>
<td>Climate and energy one of five key issue areas for FOE.</td>
<td>Yes – Both, but especially pollinators for FOE (‘The Bee Cause’ one of five key issue areas)</td>
<td>Some. AmiEs de la Terre de Québec puts more of a focus on food and agriculture, however, having a thematic committee on these issues. Many articles that make climate-agriculture links are consumption-focused though, and/or not original content. See, however, ATQ (2009).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1-2:* Overview of results of online scan of some of Canada’s best-funded environmental NGOs that work on climate change, regarding their coverage of agricultural issues.
For the ENGOs analysed that do discuss climate change and agriculture, they tend to highlight ethical food consumption as a means to take action, rather than promoting the kinds of political activism that would be in line with food sovereignty (see, e.g. David Suzuki Foundation n.d.; Kitchin 2018). There are some minor exceptions to these trends of course. For example, the David Suzuki Foundation has published a report on the links between climate change and agricultural land grabbing in Quebec (Séguin and Benoît 2015), and Greenpeace has at times paid attention to the problems associated with industrial agriculture and the potential for ecological farming to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (e.g. Bellarby et al. 2008). However, it is much more common to see these organizations encourage responsible consumption (see, e.g. Greenpeace n.d.).

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Farming for system change

Apolitical discourses about the causes of, and potential solutions to, climate change contrast with La Vía Campesina’s assertions that capitalism is unable to effectively reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and that food sovereignty requires system change. It was at the COP21 summit in Paris that the term ‘system change, not climate change’ was notably popularized, and it is clear that for La Vía Campesina ‘system change’ must be equated with an explicit call to replace the capitalist system.

In Chapter 2, I will outline the theories that have guided my approach to the research I have undertaken, arguing that the essential features of capitalism itself—as a political, socio-economic and ecological system—ultimately make it incapable of addressing the threat of climate change and the
wide-ranging socio-ecological problems connected with the food system. However, and as I document and discuss elsewhere in this dissertation, both climate change and food-related discourses and organizing typically do not take an anticapitalist stance, opting for reforms that could well perpetuate a form of ostensibly ‘green’ capitalism that fails to address systemic socio-ecological contradictions. As Friedmann (2005: 251) has noted with regard to the corporate food regime, “In the wings, capital is ever ready to appropriate what works.” It is therefore important to explore how such co-optation is possible, and to understand the forms of resistance that may bring about system change. On this point, I rely on and develop insights from Antonio Gramsci that help explain how a prevailing hegemony saturates organizing on climate and food issues, and that also help to conceptualize ways in which social movement organizing may more effectively counter capitalism’s continued expansion in the agricultural sector.

Given that I have taken a ‘scholar-activist’ approach in completing my dissertation research, I also outline my methodology in the latter part of Chapter 2. I specifically discuss the utility of engaging with Gramsci’s concept of ‘organic intellectuals,’ and I point to the challenges these intellectuals face in merging theory and practical organizing through praxis. As I argue, despite the challenges that exist, academics who recognize the importance of food sovereignty and agroecology can certainly contribute to such praxis; therefore I position myself as one of these organic intellectuals, striving to contribute the unique situated knowledge I have gathered to the service of the farmers I have met and their allies. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how this dissertation would have emerged were it not for the scholar-activism in which I have engaged.

With this in mind, the main research questions animating this dissertation are:

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1. How are ecological farmers contributing to a more ‘climate-friendly’ agriculture in Canada, and what challenges are these farmers—and organizations such as the NFU and Union Paysanne—facing in attempting to formulate and further the food sovereignty agenda in relation to climate change mitigation?

2. How can ecological farmers in this country build strategic alliances as a means to advance their campaigns for food sovereignty and agroecology, such as with climate activists and environmental organizations, and what obstacles do they face in this regard?

3. Given that international groups like La Vía Campesina argue that the implementation of food sovereignty and agroecology demand profound systemic changes, how are these concepts to be translated in the Canadian context in productive ways, and what challenges exist in terms of advancing these concepts?

The first question here is a substantial one, and I break my response to it across two chapters. In Chapter 3, I look at the on-farm practices that ecological farmers are employing to both limit their greenhouse gas emissions and contribute to carbon sequestration. However, I also analyse the challenges that exist in terms of these farmers meeting their ‘agroecological potential’ as a means to further fight climate change, and in terms of agroecology being scaled out across Canada in order to supplant industrial production practices. As I argue, agroecology—as a merging of agroecological science, practical techniques and a social movement—is a powerful conceptual and heuristic tool that must accompany food sovereignty struggles in this country. The work of ecological farmers provides a rationale for climate change activists and others to support agroecology, and I therefore point to ways that the various dimensions of agroecology can productively overlap. In Chapter 4, I discuss the work of the NFU and Union Paysanne more generally in terms of their efforts to institutionalize food sovereignty within provincial and federal jurisdictions. Both organizations are struggling to advance policies that would help a food sovereign and agroecological system counter
the dominant food regime in Canada, and while they are generally facing resistance in this respect, there is the risk of food sovereignty and related demands being co-opted by dominant players. I therefore argue that specific approaches to alliance building, both with environmentalists and more broadly, have the potential to support a social movement that will ensure food sovereignty remains politicized, a component of system change struggles. Evidently, this addresses the second research question posed above.

In Chapter 5, I take on the matter of Canadian farmers interpreting ‘system change’ in the context of capitalist hegemony. Thus, while I touch on these issues in the preceding two chapters, in this penultimate chapter I directly address my third research question. I provide evidence of some NFU and Union Paysanne members demonstrating a willingness to critique capitalism and identify with class struggles, while highlighting that it is much more common for farmers to appear comfortable with reformism rather than anticapitalism. There are, as I discuss, good reasons for critiques of capitalism to be tempered in this country, just as there are legitimate worries that farmers have about engaging with government as a means to advance food sovereignty through institutional measures. I argue, however, that organic intellectuals within the NFU and Union Paysanne will do well to embrace a radical pedagogy—a political education that focuses on food sovereignty—in their efforts to promote system change among both farmers and non-farmer allies in Canada.

As noted above, only a relative few farmers and food sovereignty proponents are able to attend events organized by La Vía Campesina and learn directly about their perspectives on climate change, agroecology and alternatives to capitalism. Yet even if all NFU and Union Paysanne members were able to participate in such gatherings and were convinced by these perspectives, there would remain significant political struggles to transform the Canadian food regime, which is at once driven by
fossil-fuel intensive agriculture and embedded in the functioning of global capitalist markets. As David Harvey (1996: 402) has said, “There is a long and arduous road to travel to take [a] movement beyond the phase of rhetorical flourishes, media successes, and symbolic politics, into a world of strong coherent political organizing and practical revolutionary action.” Throughout this dissertation, I will be considering the challenges that food sovereignty proponents must face along this ‘arduous road,’ while noting the difficulties in balancing particular, geographically specific struggles to promote ecological farming, with more general struggles aimed at genuine system change. The challenges to be faced are indeed substantial, yet I also point to the reasons that there is hope—Hope that organic intellectuals within the NFU, Union Paysanne and beyond have the potential to ‘globalize the struggle’ that La Vía Campesina talks about, as they work toward a food system that both avoids capitalist exploitation and appropriation, and contributes to an ecology that mitigates climate change. It may start with modest steps—such as city dwellers learning the value of manually removing potato beetles and turning a compost heap, or farmers kindling a new alliance with a non-farming group—yet there is the chance for those modest steps to contribute to a formidable movement that is striding toward a new system, a new hegemony.
Chapter 2

Organic intellectuals: The praxis of re-politicizing food and environmental issues

2.1 - Politicizing climate change, Politicizing food

‘Farm Washing’

In visiting over 30 farms and attending 19 farming conferences and meetings over the course of this research project, I spent countless hours on the road. Much of that time was spent on large highways like Ontario’s 401 and Quebec’s Autoroute 20, where I occasionally stopped at service centres for a coffee break. The fast-food outlets at those service centres offer an opportunity to analyze the range of marketing techniques being employed to entice consumers through various claims about the food on offer. A striking example is A&W’s campaign that has been rolled out through the burger chain’s approximately 850 outlets across Canada, which focuses on the animal products that are being sold. Often featuring images of bucolic farm settings, with rolling pastures set against deep blue skies, the company’s marketing materials proudly advertise that, for example, their “beef is raised without any added hormones or steroids,” their “eggs are from hens fed a vegetarian diet,” and their pork is “raised without the use of antibiotics” (see A&W Canada n.d.). While these claims may ostensibly be true, they are misleading or selective disclosures that mask the realities of industrial livestock operations in particular and of capitalist food retail in general.

Informed observers would be quick to point to what is not being said by A&W through these marketing efforts, such as that its beef cattle are still undoubtedly fed genetically modified (GM)
feed, that chickens are typically omnivorous rather than vegetarian, and that pigs that they source are being raised in severely confined gestation crates. While the extensive problems associated with industrial animal farming have been well documented (see Weis 2013; cf. Boyd 2001), as have the consequences of corporate concentration in fast-food retail, from health, labour and other perspectives (see, e.g., Albritton 2009; Patel 2007), what is notable about A&W’s strategy is that it is evidently a response to concerns that people have about the food they are eating. Whether it is a question of individual health, or concerns about animal welfare or the environment, the company is clearly trying to address—albeit in partial ways and through selective messaging—the fact that many Canadians are expressing some level of awareness about the impacts of their food choices (see Dodds et al. 2014). Evidence of increasing public concern about food and agricultural issues may be a positive sign, but it is important to acknowledge that this concern can largely be co-opted through corporate half-measures and marketing schemes.

To be sure, A&W is not alone in taking these approaches. McDonald’s Canada, for example, launched a ‘Not Without Canadian Farmers’ marketing campaign in 2015 (see Birk n.d.), and NFU farmer, author and organizer, Aric McBay subsequently published an article drawing attention to the misleading ‘farm-washing’ that goes on through such campaigns (McBay 2016). While this kind of advertising is a reaction to public interest in local food and sustainable agriculture, McBay argues, fast-food restaurants are trying to fool people:

[On] their website, McDonald’s brags: “We get our hamburger patties from Cargill in Spruce Grove, Alberta.” This sort of thing sounds great if you’ve never heard of Cargill [...] which is, in fact, the largest privately-held corporation in the world. It is headquartered in the US, but runs its global trading mostly out of Switzerland, which—as with many companies with

Note that A&W has admitted to this on its website, saying that they use “a combination of open housing and gestation crates” and that they are “committed to phasing out gestation crates, but are not there just yet” (see http://awguarantee.ca/en/faq/bacon/). Some may be satisfied by A&W’s suggestion that they will try to transition towards ‘open housing’ for pigs that they source, but an online search for images of gestation crates gives an indication of how inhumane these practices are.
operations offshore—allows it to avoid taxes... Globally, Cargill has been accused of almost every human and ecological transgression a corporation can perpetrate. They’ve been blamed for deforestation in the Amazon, while in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea their palm oil plantations have reportedly forced independent farmers off their land and into indentured labour on those plantations. And Cargill has been sued by the International Labor Rights Fund for alleged involvement in child trafficking and child forced labour on cocoa plantations in the African country of Côte d’Ivoire. (ibid.)

McBay continues by pointing out that, for every dollar spent at McDonald’s, only “fractions of a cent” will ever go to a Canadian farmer, with the most profits being captured by the fast-food giant itself or by agribusiness corporations.

The example of fast-food restaurants’ attempts to pacify segments of the Canadian population who have concerns about the agricultural system is important in that it illustrates the depoliticized nature of many responses to food issues. Just as some climate change discourses encourage individualistic responses—e.g. celebrating consumers who change their lightbulbs and purchase hybrid cars—so too is there a trend of people’s awareness of problems in the industrial food system being muted by opportunities to ostensibly engage in responsible food consumption.

In this chapter I lay out the theoretical framework that has informed my research project, beginning with an exploration of what has been called the ‘post-political’ nature of approaches that are commonly taken up as a response to both climate change and food issues. I then discuss in some detail the theories that can inform a significantly more politicized (or ‘radical’) analysis of these issues, which includes a description of the interwoven nature of the food system and the capitalist system more broadly. I argue that understanding the systemic forces that drive capitalism is crucial for food sovereignty and environmental activists who hope to do more than tinker with addressing symptoms of deeply rooted socio-ecological problems. The point, however, is not to dwell on such systemic problems, but rather to consider how those problems may be overcome. I therefore
elucidate a number of concepts associated with the writings of Antonio Gramsci, suggesting that these ideas may provide the most helpful framework for an intellectual and activist-oriented project that aims to contribute to the realization of food sovereignty and a post-carbon future, while acknowledging that Canada is embedded in a capitalist framework that is inhibiting such end goals.

In this respect, a key Gramscian concept (mentioned in Chapter 1) is that of the ‘organic intellectual,’ whose role is to contribute to the establishment of a new kind of (non-capitalist) society through the promotion of counterhegemonic ideas and through practical organizing efforts. McBay’s article on farm-washing is an example of the intellectual work that can be done to help counter deceptive tactics of corporations that aim to placate a potentially agitated public. And while there is a stratum of organic intellectuals among the farmers I have met in conducting my research, I also argue that academics can have a role to play in contributing to the social changes that are needed in Canada and beyond. I therefore, in the second half of this chapter, discuss the methodologies that guided my research, and the challenges and opportunities that exist for someone like me who aims to be an effective scholar-activist. In particular, I demonstrate that the notion of the organic intellectual demands that academics broaden their perspectives on movement-relevant scholarship and participatory action research projects.

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Post-politics and climate change

Several authors have discussed the turn toward the ‘post-political’ in recent years, with these authors often pointing to trends that have become particularly noticeable since the fall of the Soviet Union and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In essence, the post-political suggests that a
widespread agreement exists that assumes that liberal democracy should be universalized and that, following Margaret Thatcher’s argument in the 1980s, there is no alternative to the capitalist socio-economic order (Hall 1988). In the words of Slavoj Žižek (2008: 37): “It is easy to make fun of Fukuyama’s notion of the End of History, but the majority today is ‘Fukuyamaian’: liberal-democratic capitalism is accepted as the finally-found formula of the best possible society, all one can do is to render it more just, tolerant, etc.”

At times this trend is evident by the absence of particular discourses, such as the omission (intentional or subconscious) of the term ‘capitalism’ itself—including by some academics—in discussing the political-economic system that is dominant globally in various guises (Swyngedouw 2010, 2011; Žižek 2008). At other times, a turn towards the post-political is demonstrated by ostensible Left political parties, including nominally socialist parties, that crowd the centre of the political spectrum (Mouffe 2005). It is common, in fact, for the parameters of political debates and campaigns to be severely constrained as a result of a shift from Right versus Left politics to discourses of ‘right’ versus ‘wrong’. As Mouffe (2005) describes, the dominance of a moralizing tone has the effect of silencing or occluding any real opposition to the existing economic order, and critiques of capitalism are often foreclosed as politically unpalatable. Discourses of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ situate oppositional forces, and those who would sympathize with those forces, as enemies—deserving of an open hostility—as opposed to political adversaries with whom one could engage in a constructive, albeit confrontational, manner (ibid.). Thus, while political parties may still jockey for position in the world of electoral politics, there is a general consensus that underpins the assumptions they make, limiting the sphere of debate. As Rancière (2001) notes, ‘consensus’ is the vulgar (or popular) name given to the very “cancelling out” of politics. Governments, therefore, are reduced to playing a managerial
role, ensuring the smooth operation of the (capitalist) economy as a top priority (Žižek 2008; cf. Swyngedouw 2010).

In the world of climate change debates, post-politics takes particular forms. As Swyngedouw (2010) discusses, the severity of climate change is widely acknowledged, with the scientific evidence aggregated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) generally being accepted as irrefutable (even by many global warming sceptics; see Klein 2014: Ch. 1). However, he argues, the staging of public discourses on the issue steers one to believe that the consensus regarding the direness and complexity of the matter implies that tackling climate change should be left up to the experts (i.e. scientists, policy makers, intergovernmental organizations, and some ‘responsible’ [read: not radical] NGOs) (Swyngedouw 2010; cf. Demeritt 2001; Luke 2006). The topics up for discussion at international Conference of Parties (COP) meetings during United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations demonstrate just how esoteric these ‘expert’ conversations can be. On top of a labyrinth of bureaucratic procedures at these meetings, the profusion of acronyms and terminology that are used would baffle the uninitiated, e.g.: the L&D (Loss and Damage mechanism), the GCF (Green Climate Fund), INDCs (Intended Nationally Determined Commitments), and the ADP (Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action) (Parks and Roberts 2010). As with the post-political condition generally, these conversations are constrained, based on the conviction that capitalism can “make a new climate” (Swyngedouw 2010: 224). Radical change is necessary, but it will take place within the dominant paradigm. From emissions trading and carbon pricing to funds for adaptation, the climate crisis will be dealt with via a range of techno-managerial solutions and, in fact, it will be the source of
economic opportunities. Politicians are keen to discuss the huge sums of money that will be generated to support national economies, as countries pitch in to tackle climate change.21

Meanwhile, complementing the notion that climate change should be left to policy makers and other professed experts, there has been a proliferation of sterile, technical discourses about the quantities of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the atmosphere—discourses contributing to the “fetishization of carbon dioxide” (Swyngedouw 2010). This mention of ‘fetishization’ is an echo of Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism, an important concept in relation to post-politics. In drawing on notions of religious fetishism, or idolatry, that were being discussed in his day, Marx argued that commodities are fetishized in capitalist society, as processes of exchange lead to the obscuration of socio-ecological relations that contribute to the production of those commodities (Marx 1977: 163-177). The purchaser of a particular commodity—a wood table, for example—may therefore appreciate its use-value in terms of its practical function for her purposes, however she would likely have no way of knowing about the labour processes that went into designing, fabricating and transporting that table, nor the manner in which its components were extracted as raw materials (trees, ore, etc.) before being sold for production. The fact that a commodity is produced for exchange-value (with surplus-value being extracted by capitalists) therefore leads to it becoming an end in itself. Commodities thus take on a ‘mystical’ or ‘mysterious’ character as Marx put it (ibid.), as complex and diverse processes and relations are hidden from the sight of consumers in the marketplace.

21 As Canada’s Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Catherine McKenna, indicated in an interview in 2017, “Canadians know that climate change is real—we’re seeing the impacts—but we also see the economic opportunity… If we don’t take …action it’s not just about the future of our planet; we’re going to miss out on the biggest economic opportunity—It’s in the trillions of dollars…” (CBC Radio 2017).
In the geographically complex dynamics that are unfolding with regard to climate change, therefore, fetishization occurs as these matters are reduced to the “singular socio-chemical component (CO2)” (Swyngedouw 2010: 220). The reference to Marx’s concept is particularly apt given that carbon dioxide (and its equivalents) has been converted into commodity form, to be bought and sold by way of carbon markets (Lohmann 2008, 2009; Liverman 2010). For example, in the case of carbon offsetting, fetishism is apparent in that the purchaser of a carbon offset assumes that funds provided to reduce CO2 in a distant place as a means to compensate for past emissions will have a tangible (and positive) contribution. However, there is seldom a verification process that can validate such an assumption, and offsetting may well amount to a shell game that perpetuates atmospheric pollution, shifting responsibility for that pollution, and perhaps even displacing people from their land for the sake of planting fast-growing trees or some other such scheme (ibid. cf. Bachram 2004; Hoffman 2011).

Commodity fetishism also comes into play in the post-politics of climate change in terms of discourses that treat climate change as ‘a global humanitarian cause’ to which individuals can contribute by modifying their consumption habits (Swyngedouw 2010; cf. Brownstone 2017). While scientists, government representatives and other experts take on the heavy lifting of negotiating climate change agreements and coordinating techno-managerial solutions, people can simply pitch in by making minor lifestyle changes—shopping ‘responsibly’ and monitoring their individual carbon footprints. Some have referred to this form of governmentality as ‘environmentality,’ a form of self-discipline in which individuals internalize lessons about what it means to be a good citizen, but with a particular focus on an ecological concern such as climate change (Agrawal 2005; cf. Foucault 2000; Luke 1997). The belief in an abstract ‘climate threat’ coupled with a desire to contribute to a solution within very constrained parameters (the sphere of consumption and everyday habits) thus leads to
the constitution of not only the ‘good citizen’ but the ‘neurotic citizen’—the individual anxious to
do their part at the ‘micro-political’ level (Berglez and Olausson 2014; cf. Isin 2004). Commodity
fetishism is certainly relevant here as goods and services purchased as means to reduce or limit
GHG emissions are likely to obscure as much as they disclose.

Of course, it would be simplistic to suggest that in this post-political moment it is only individuals
and a stratum of government officials and other experts that are attempting, even if in constrained
ways, to take action on climate change. There are grassroots groups and non-profit organizations
that are simultaneously active at various scales and making use of various strategies. The question is
to what extent such groups have been able to counter the turn towards the post-political in recent
decades. Evidence from UNFCCC meetings that have taken place over the last several years
demonstrate that ENGOs and activist groups have in fact had little success in influencing climate
change politics (Hadden 2014; Kenis and Mathijs 2014; Parks and Roberts 2010; Russell et al 2012).
Scholars have characterized larger and better-funded non-profit organizations as ‘mainstream,’ as
these organizations often adopt an ‘inside’ approach to climate negotiations by trying to
incrementally shift the language of accords, taking up what marginal room is afforded to ‘civil
society’ in these spaces. These particular ENGOs surely contribute to a post-political framing as
they either implicitly or explicitly subscribe to the market-oriented solutions on offer, buoying the
performance of expertise by the elites present at these negotiations and generally helping to
legitimize the process (Bachram 2004; Bond 2012).

In contrast, groups that take an ‘outside’ approach and engage in various forms of protest outside of
UNFCCC meetings do seem to make more of a concerted effort to re-politicize climate change
debates. However, while these more activist-oriented groups may draw attention to the lack of
democratic process on display through the negotiations, and ‘make visible’ other contentious issues that would otherwise be left invisible, they typically fail to do more than this (Kenis and Mathijs 2014). A major problem here is that these groups seem to take up re-politicization as an end in itself, rather than a means to articulate viable alternatives and to begin constructing political projects that would address climate change among a host of other socio-ecological issues (ibid.; cf. Swyngedouw 2010, 2011).

Apart from UN climate change conferences there are certainly related campaigns that are perpetually underway, however these are also typically caught up in the mire of post-politics. Environmental groups, for example, often focus on themes such as saving ‘nature’ and protecting charismatic species (from tigers and orca whales to sea turtles and polar bears), which are problematic in that they fall into the dualistic characterization that separates humanity from the rest of nature. Scholars’ discussions of ‘socio-nature,’ in contrast, point to the contentious political factors that cannot be ignored if one acknowledges that humans are constantly producing non-human nature in order to meet their basic needs, shaping and re-shaping the metabolic relations that order life in urban and rural areas around the globe (see Heynen 2014; Keil 2003; Swyngedouw 1996). On a related note, environmental organizations are also prone to falling into the trap of opposing fossil fuel extraction projects, pipeline proposals and similar activities but, as with groups protesting at climate change conferences, failing to articulate alternatives and political projects that would challenge the dominance of capitalist socio-ecological processes.

More broadly, however, the day-to-day work of ENGOs can also be analyzed critically for contributing to what has been described as the ‘non-profit industrial complex’ (NPIC) (Smith A. 2007). Several authors have commented on the tendency under neoliberal capitalism, which has
progressed in tandem with the post-political condition, for governments to shift responsibility for social welfare onto charitable and other non-profit organizations (Bondi and Laurie 2005; Peck and Tickell 2002; Trudeau 2008). The NPIC “manages and controls dissent by incorporating it into the state apparatus, functioning as a ‘shadow state’ constituted by a network of institutions that do much of what government agencies are supposed to do with tax money…” (Smith A. 2007: 8-9; cf. Mitchell K. 2001; Wolch 1990). While critics of the NPIC often focus on its role in relation to social services and education, this analysis can be extended to the functioning of environmental charities and other non-profits. A recent report revealed that there are just under 1,200 environmental charities registered in Canada, including approximately 300 large organizations that bring in a combined annual revenue of over $750 million (Grandy 2013: 8-9). In total, environmental charities raise nearly $300 million from public donations and foundations (ibid.), on top of funds they may receive from governmental and other sources. These organizations carry out a range of activities that might otherwise fall under the purview of the state, including research, environmental protection, education, ecological monitoring and more. One of the most disconcerting features of the NPIC is the fact that it can serve to temper the more radical critiques and ambitious proposals that organizations may hold. In part this is managed through the conditions associated with grants and other funding mechanisms provided by philanthropic foundations and other agencies (Smith A. 2007), while the granting of charitable status in Canada limits the amount of advocacy work in which an organization may engage. ENGOs also generally serve as an outlet for the neurotic citizen anxious to ‘do something’ in the face of climate change and other environmental problems, offering another sphere of commodity fetishism as people engage in charitable giving in order to pacify their concerns about ecological conditions at various scales.  

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Post-politics and food

The various concepts described here, from the non-profit industrial complex and commodity fetishism to the post-political condition generally, are also quite apparent in the world of food and agricultural debates. The performance of expertise, for example, is certainly common—along with the proposition that scientists, government officials and industry groups are at the helm when it comes to addressing problems related to food and agriculture. To be sure, the average Canadian is not likely to be contemplating the inner workings of the supply management system, land-use legislation, experiments in plant breeding, or the implications of trade agreements under negotiation at a given time. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the general public’s knowledge of—and relationship to—these matters is produced through the ways that they are (or are not) taken up in the education system, media coverage and government discourses (see Castree 2014). Following Lang and Headman, Friedmann (2005) discusses the ‘Life Sciences Integrated paradigm,’ which elevates specialized sciences and industries as the primary problem-solvers when it comes to environmental and health-related issues in the food system. On offer are plants and animals that, thanks to feats of biotechnology, will require the use of fewer chemicals and toxins while increasing productivity, as well as “engineered foods containing vitamins and other synthetic nutrients” (ibid.: 258). The rhetoric that suggests that such technological solutions can safely feed the world’s growing population converges with similar promises, such as that of a ‘Climate Smart Agriculture,’ which would have patented seeds and genetically modified plants (and the corporations that produce them) held up as the saviours of a food system faced with increasingly severe droughts and other weather-related pressures (see Deen 2014).
All told, the Life Sciences Integrated paradigm proposes techno-managerial solutions in a similar way that the tackling of climate change is to be accomplished by supposed experts, and these solutions are often held in high regard by government officials and many NGOs through the prioritization of rationalized, formal and technical knowledge applications (see Goodman et al. 2012: Ch. 9). At the same time, ostensibly competing with this framework is the ‘Ecologically Integrated paradigm,’ which focuses on the public sector and an integrated perspective of ecosystems and human health (Friedmann 2005). However, the selective adoption of certain aspects of this paradigm evidently results in market-based strategies where consumers who can afford to eat well have access to a wide range of relatively unprocessed and chemical-free foods. A two-tiered but complementary system emerges, with more privileged classes enjoying organic vegetables and similar products, and the world’s poor being compelled to rely on cheap, artificially enriched foods (ibid.). The implication here is that the post-political condition reaches well beyond climate change debates, as Green Capitalism is positioned to also resolve a host of problems within global food and agricultural systems.

In this context, the residents of advanced capitalist countries are again relegated to playing the role of consumer, shopping for food as responsibly as their purchasing power will allow (Lockie 2009). For some that means prioritizing the purchasing of organic, local, or Fair Trade foods, while others may even play the role of ‘good citizen’ through their choice of particular convenience or fast foods, such as by selecting A&W hamburgers (that are free of added hormones or steroids) or by eating at McDonalds since the company purportedly supports Canadian farmers. The common thread is that of commodity fetishism. As various scholarly research projects have shown, certification and labelling schemes—and marketing strategies more generally—in the food sector actually reveal very little about the socio-ecological processes behind the commodities with which they are associated.
In the case of organic foods, consumers typically know very little about the permitted substances and production techniques that are used in the growing of given fruits, vegetables, grains and meats; not to mention the (potentially exploitative) labour practices that were employed (Guthman 2004). Organic labels also reveal nothing about issues such as corporate concentration, which has certainly been ramping up—albeit behind the scenes—in the organic sector in recent years (Johnston et al. 2009). Similarly, while it is common for food products to be advertised as ‘local’, such as under the Foodland Ontario or Aliments du Québec programs, it is easy to fall into what has been described as the ‘local trap,’ where one takes the local scale to be an end in itself as opposed to one of many factors, including labour justice and ecologically oriented production practices, that could contribute to an improved food system (Born and Purcell 2006; cf. MacDonald 2013). Apart from the fetishization of different labels and certification schemes, food—like carbon dioxide—has also become increasingly treated as a commodity, including through processes of financialization that can, for example, lead to drastic price fluctuations that leave certain populations unable to afford to feed themselves (as was the case during the 2008 and 2011 financial crises) (Clapp 2014; Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011).

The post-politics of approaches to food issues also extends to groups and organizations striving to make change in the food system. Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011) categorize such efforts as either aligning with ‘neoliberal’ or ‘reformist’ approaches that ultimately perpetuate the current food regime, or ‘progressive’ or ‘radical’ strands of what is described as the food movement. Whereas the neoliberal model advances markets and biotechnologies as solutions to social and environmental crises in the food system (as described above with reference to the Life Sciences Integrated paradigm), the reformist approach is similar but highlights the importance of food security and the
operation of food banks and food aid programs, and celebrates mainstream food certification programs (e.g. Fair Trade) and the role of large NGOs and bodies like the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (ibid.). Food banks and similar organizations certainly fall under the umbrella of the non-profit industrial complex, as they have served to stand in for government services that have been rolled back since the late 1970s (Poppendieck 1999; cf. Wakefield et al. 2013).

The progressive strand of the food movement, on the other hand, focuses on issues of justice and community food security, advocating for food policy councils, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, and support for farmworkers’ and other labour organizations (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). This is the dominant face of the food movement in North America, whereas more radical discourses and actions are associated with the food sovereignty movement that has more traction in the global south, with its calls for agrarian reform, peasant rights, and the promotion of peasant-based agroecological systems (ibid.). Various scholars have critiqued the relatively constrained approaches that are associated with the progressive movement, as is the case with the often-unquestioned celebration of farmers markets, which disproportionately cater to white, socio-economically privileged consumers (Guthman 2008a, 2008b; cf. Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Goodman et al. 2012; Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011). Similarly, CSA programs and other initiatives have been critiqued as “transitory utopian entertainment for a few middle-class consumers and their fortunate few farmer friends” (Goodman and DuPuis 2002: 17), just as proposals for individuals to “vote with their fork” can be seen as a key signifier of the post-political condition (see Guthman 2008c).
Of course, it is not always such a clear-cut matter to separate particular initiatives or organizations into one or another category (Goodman et al. 2012), however a review of the literature makes it clear that, in countries like Canada, there is a real likelihood that the progressive elements of the food movement run the risk of being co-opted or otherwise being restrained due to the socio-economic forces that overdetermine them in the capitalist context (see Wittman et al. 2011; cf. Dale 2017). In other words, as with climate change politics, the progressive food movement may well be pulled more toward reformism rather than radicalism.

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2.2 - A radical perspective

Capitalist ecology

The key questions, in light of the post-political condition, are ‘How does one define radicalism?’ and ‘How do movements shift towards a politicized approach in tackling these issues?’. I will address the first question here before moving on to the second in Section 2.3 below. It is important to articulate a clear formulation of radicalism because, for one, in popular discourses (e.g. through mainstream media) the word ‘radical’ is often associated with violence and terrorism. At the same time, some food movement actors and academics may use the term radicalism without clearly defining it, as is done with rather general words like ‘transformative’/‘transformation’ and phrases like ‘system change.’ To be clear then, as I discuss radicalism throughout the remainder of this document, I am not condoning violence but I am referring to an approach that aims to critique capitalism and build an alternative political-economic system. Similarly, any discussion of societal ‘transformation’ or ‘system change’ should, in my mind, be equated with such a radical approach and a desire to
contribute to a shift away from capitalist relations. With this in mind, and to justify the necessity of defining radicalism in such a manner, I will argue here that capitalism itself is inherently unsustainable, and that it is important to recognize the existence of a capitalist ecology generally, and a capitalist food system specifically (and not just an ‘industrial’ or ‘corporate’ food system).

The fact that capitalism fundamentally cannot be sustained is evident in the fact that profit accumulation is a defining feature of the system, and that this requires the exploitation of both humans and non-human nature. To be sure, capitalist development has been varied both geographically and historically, but it is possible to make some generalized observations about how capitalism works. Marx represented capitalist production by the expression M-C-M', which reflects the process that capitalists undertake by using money (M) to purchase the means of production (including raw materials and labour-power) to generate a commodity (C) through the production process, which was in turn sold to generate a profit (M') that could then be reinvested to begin the process anew (Marx 1977 cf. Harvey 1982; Smith N. 1984). While commodities and processes of exchange are not unique to capitalism, as Kloppenburg (2004: 22-25) summarizes:

> What is distinctive about capitalism is that it is characterized by a system of generalized commodity production… [C]apital constantly seeks to force all use-values to submit to the commodity-form and to convert simple commodity production to capitalist commodity production wherever and whenever it can. (Emphasis in original)

The quest to perpetually increase surplus value through commodity production is driven by the competitive environment in which capitalists must operate; if one does not prioritize and actualize profit maximization through the production process, then another capitalist will find ways to produce commodities more cheaply and drive the less-competitive person out of business. As a result, there is a constant need to keep the costs of the means of production low, which means that capitalists will prefer cheap labour power—often moving production processes to access it—and
cheap raw materials, which Marx, following the political economists he critiqued, referred to as the ‘free gifts’ of nature (ibid. cf. O’Connor 1988).

In this light, as Jason Moore states, “Capitalism does not have an ecological regime; it is an ecological regime” (Moore J. 2011: 2, emphasis in original); and, given the scope of capitalism today, it should be viewed as a ‘world-ecology’ (Moore J. 2011, 2015). This perspective of capitalism is far from hyperbolic. While humans must always ‘produce’ (non-human) nature in order to meet their basic needs (Smith N. 1984), under capitalism accumulation for accumulation’s sake becomes a socially imposed necessity and, as “capital stalks the earth in search of material resources …nature becomes a universal means of production in the sense that it not only provides the subjects, objects, and instruments of production, but is also in its totality an appendage to the production process” (Smith N. 1984: 71, emphasis in original). This has serious implications given that an infinite desire for profit will undoubtedly run up against the finite nature of the Earth’s resources. As Marx noted however, capitalism does not recognize limits, but rather sees them as barriers to be overcome in the ongoing (and mandatory) quest to accumulate profits.22 Capital has therefore regularly demonstrated its deftness in facing the challenges presented by socio-nature, responding geographically or through technological innovation to keep such problems at bay. Of course, the contradictions within capitalism are not limited to its search for cheap and accessible raw materials as means of production: it is also consistently running into problems as it treats non-human nature as a dumping ground for wastes that are generated in the production of commodities.

James O’Connor (1988, 1991) has discussed the ecological implications of these tendencies in terms of capitalism’s ‘second contradiction.’ In discussing how capitalism tends to generate its own crises,

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22 In Marx’s words (1973: 334-335), “Capital is the endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting barrier. Every boundary is and has to be a [mere] barrier for it.” (cf. Harvey 1982).
Marx had identified a contradiction inherent in the relations of production, as capitalists exploited labour power (i.e. through low wages and difficult working conditions) in the pursuit of surplus value (i.e. to maximize profit) (ibid. cf. Harvey 1982). With competition between capitalists continually driving down wages across the board, a crisis of overproduction develops as the market for the commodities those capitalists collectively produce goes soft—workers are unable to afford the very products they helped create (ibid.). As Marx demonstrated, this contradiction can often be contained through credit mechanisms, with capitalists indirectly lending money (through banks) to labourers so that the capitalists can continue to exploit them, thereby avoiding widespread revolt.

The second contradiction, according to O’Connor (1988, 1991), has to do with the conditions of production as opposed to the relations of production. As O’Connor (1988: 15) argued, Marx failed to emphasize that “‘natural barriers’ [to accumulation] may be capitalistically produced barriers.” Simply put, competition forces capitalists to externalize environmental costs, which in the long run drives up the costs of production because of overall ecosystem degradation.

In other words, through the production process, which involves extracting raw materials and generating waste and pollution, capitalists fail to restore the ‘free gifts’ of nature that they have relied upon, thus ‘underproducing’ nature (O’Connor 1988, 1991; cf. Luke 2006). O’Connor’s thesis has proven to be resonant in that it speaks to metabolic relations under capitalism in a way that Marx would not have able to observe, at least not as we can in the early 21st century. From “congestion costs in cities” (O’Connor 1991: 107) to interruptions to ‘business as usual’ caused by the storms exacerbated by climate change, the second contradiction strikes at the cost side of accumulation rather than the demand side (as with Marx’s ‘first’ contradiction). As O’Connor (1991: 108) summarizes, “when individual capitals lower costs, e.g., externalize costs on to conditions of production (nature, laborpower, or the urban) with the aim of defending or restoring profits, the
unintended effect is to raise costs on other capitals (and, at the limit, capital as a whole), lowering produced profits.”

Taken together, the compulsion to accumulate profits and capitalism’s internal and unresolvable contradictions strike a fatal blow at the argument that capitalism can solve the climate crisis. While capital investments may partially support a transition to carbon-free energy sources for example, it is impossible to see how a ‘green’ capitalism could reconcile impulses to internalize environmental costs and have people worldwide affordably access clean energy technologies, with an in-built need to keep production costs (including wages and raw materials) at a minimum (see McCarthy 2015). This is to say nothing of the approximated 27 trillion dollars worth of assets already tied up in known fossil fuel reserves by oil and gas corporations (McKibben 2012), and the path dependency created by over 150 years of fossil-fuel-driven capitalism (Malm 2016).

While many theorists have questioned how long capitalism will be able to successfully adapt to its systemic crises by temporally and spatially shifting its problems (e.g. Harvey 1982, 1996), some scholars are now identifying factors that may potentially lead to its terminal crisis. Žižek (2011: x), for example, argues that

the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point. Its “four riders of the apocalypse” are comprised by the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system itself (problems with intellectual property; forthcoming struggles over raw materials, food and water), and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions.

Moore (2015), on the other hand, makes a complementary assertion, drawing attention to capitalism’s increasingly limited capacity to rely on the “Cheap Nature” that has allowed it to function as a world-ecology in recent centuries. Specifically, he points to the potential end of cheap

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23 For another perspective on capitalism’s contradictions see Harvey (2014).
labour and cheap food (which, along with cheap energy and cheap raw materials, underpin the generation of value within capitalism), highlighting that this may signify an ‘epochal’ crisis for the system as a whole, as opposed to a more limited ‘developmental’ crisis such as those witnessed in recent decades (ibid.).

The point here is not to speculate on when capitalism’s contradictions may compel it to meet its ultimate limits, but rather to stress that the system does have limits, and that it is the internal workings of capitalism as an ongoing historical process that are the root cause of much of the socio-ecological destruction that we see in the world today. It can be politically inconvenient for many politicians, environmentalists and others to link the loss of human lives due to a drought or severe storm, or worker suicides in a factory in the global south, to the functioning of global capitalism but, as I have tried to illustrate here, the system inherently operates on principles that make for a miserable world-ecology. This is why I assert that radicalism must be defined in relation to a direct confrontation with capitalism, and this is why it is worth recognizing that, generally, a capitalist ecology is in place.

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Agrarian Questions

Before concluding this section, a few observations must be made about capitalism’s particular interactions with the food system. As far back as the 1890s questions were being raised about how capitalism would affect food production and peasant livelihoods. In 1899, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1899) and Karl Kautsky (1899) developed “the agrarian question”—but Friedrich Engels had helped to initiate the conversation in The Peasant Question in France and Germany in 1894 (Akram-Lodhi
Engels was curious about the fate of the peasantry, a class that he saw as eventually disappearing with the development of capitalism. The peasantry was not, in fact, disappearing by the 1890s, and Engels raised the question as to whether this broad group could be stirred into militant action by the likes of the German Social Democratic Party when it came time for a revolution that would overthrow capitalism (ibid.). While the political nature at the heart of Engels’ discussion on this matter did not disappear, Lenin and Kautsky more clearly articulated the routes through which capitalism seemed to be infiltrating the countryside.

Both writers were building on Marx’s works that discussed the process of ‘primitive accumulation’ that, in England at least, had been central to the transition from feudal relations to capitalist relations, as rural residents were gradually separated from their means of production (Marx 1977: Part Eight). In volume one of *Capital*, Marx discussed how, from the 15th century onwards, the land of the agricultural population of England was steadily expropriated both through violent and legal means (ibid.; cf. Patnaik 2007; Thompson 1975). Cleared from common lands, the peasantry was compelled to move to newly urbanizing areas or to work in the capitalistic agriculture based on private property rights that was emerging in England. In Marx’s words (1977: 909), “The peasant, expropriated and cast adrift, had to obtain the value of the means of subsistence from his new lord, the industrial capitalist, in the form of wages.” Outside of England, where capitalism was advancing in uneven and varying ways, Lenin and Kautsky took up the question of how capitalism may encroach upon agriculture even where peasants retained access to their land. Independently, but complementarily, they analyzed data available to them on the economic relations of various sized farms and their connection to the market.
Kautsky (1899), for example, reviewed statistics from France and Germany, in addition to England, that pointed to the marked increase in the number of tenant farmers throughout the latter part of the 19th century. With landowners able to extract surplus-value in the form of (absolute) ground rent, tenant farmers were compelled to produce not only for their own subsistence but also to generate goods that they could sell on the market in order to earn enough money to avoid eviction. “Modern agriculture is impossible without money, or …without capital,” wrote Kautsky. “A modern farm is therefore a capitalist enterprise, and bears the characteristic features of the capitalist mode of production, but in forms unique to itself” (1899: 59). He also paid particular attention to the advantages that larger farms had over smaller farms, such as having easier access to credit (as banks were more willing to lend to larger enterprises) and opportunities to make efficient use of farm machinery. Small tenant farmers and peasants would therefore be at a disadvantage in competing with these larger farms. As discussed below, this unequal playing field in fact remains relevant to agrarian politics today. The only advantage that Kautsky saw the smaller farmers having is that they would overwork themselves (including the women and children on the farm) and consume less, at least in comparison to the growing class of capitalist farmers and their hired farmworkers.

Looking at agricultural trends in Russia, Lenin (1899) also observed that wage-labourers in rural areas seemed to be better off than small farmers. He argued that peasants were, as a group, diverging into different classes, either becoming part of the rural proletariat or the rural bourgeoisie (which he also called the ‘well-to-do peasantry’). “They are the masters of the contemporary countryside,” wrote Lenin (1899: 180) regarding the latter. Apart from these two burgeoning classes, he also discussed the ‘middle peasantry,’ which was increasingly being pulled into commodity circuits. Building on Marx’s concept of the ‘home market,’ Lenin (1899) argued that the remaining peasants would be subsumed under capitalism as they would more and more need to rely on purchasing the
means of their reproduction (plus agricultural tools, etc. for production) from outside sources, thereby increasingly selling their surplus produce through the market. Together, Kautsky and Lenin painted a picture of the peasantry bifurcating, with those unable to compete in capitalist agriculture hiring themselves out as wage-labourers, and those better off being able to hire rural workers themselves.

Debates over the agrarian question continued throughout the 20th century, especially from the 1960s onward. The role of peasants in China’s Cultural Revolution, the Vietnam War, and more generally during the string of conflicts that Eric Wolf described in his 1969 book Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century, struck scholars as indicative of the ongoing political salience of the agrarian question (see Bernstein and Byres 2001; Bernstein 2006; Buttel 2001). Meanwhile, others continued to ask to what extent capital was working its way into agriculture given that peasant and small-scale farmers, although fewer in number, were continuing to farm around the world. In 1978, the Mann-Dickinson thesis stirred up interest in academic circles by offering explanations as to why capital had not been able to advance into farming as it had done in other areas. As summarized by Susan Mann (1990: Ch. 2), as a sector that is ‘centred in nature,’ agriculture is unlike industry in many ways that makes capitalist accumulation difficult. Ground rent, while beneficial to landowners, is one barrier to accumulation given that land is a fixed resource and conditions can inhibit capitalists from acquiring the contiguous parcels of land that would help them to expand production; whereas large-scale tenancy can be incompatible with the maximization of profits (ibid.).

The seasonal nature of farming is also a challenge. Compared to industry, the turnover time is rather low in agriculture, with its long intervals between productive cycles, and it is difficult for would-be capitalist farmers to try to overcome this. Mann also points out that seasonality means that
generating a profit is a challenge in that farm machinery cannot be used efficiently: it will sit idle for long periods of time and depreciate in value. At the same time, the need for labour-power—the primary variable in capitalists’ ability to extract surplus-value—fluctuates throughout the growing season, which means that, from sowing seeds to harvesting produce, agriculture experiences “sharper peaks and gluts in the cycle of labor demand” than industry (ibid.: 40). In addition to these factors, as Marx pointed out, agricultural commodities cannot be treated the same as those leaving a factory. Food tends to spoil or rot if it is not harvested or transported to market in a timely manner. As a result, storing agricultural commodities can be difficult or expensive (e.g. requiring refrigeration), and their shipment over long distances can be unmanageable (Mann S. 1990).

While agriculture should not be approached like any other industry (and, indeed, all industries have their own distinct geographical, economic, political, and cultural features), capitalist social relations and the reach of capitalist accumulation have progressively infiltrated the sector, especially since the Second World War. This includes by means of what Goodman, Sorj and Wilkinson (1987) refer to as the twin avenues of appropriationism and substitutionism. The former describes a systemic tendency toward the progressive displacement of discrete elements of on-farm production by means of the introduction of commodified, off-farm sourced inputs (e.g., purchased chemical fertilizers that have widely displaced manure and crop wastes produced on-farm). Another example of appropriationism is the increasing reliance of farmers on purchased, commodified seeds, including of course in recent decades, the commercialization of genetically modified seeds (Kloppenburg 2004). These dynamics have allowed capitalist accumulation to take hold of discrete aspects of on-farm production, often to the benefit of transnational corporations, while otherwise leaving on-farm production intact (if progressively ‘hollowed out’). Substitutionism, on the other hand, involves the wholesale replacement of on-farm products by others that circumvent the farm in the production process.
Processed foods such as margarine, for instance, come to replace butter, or synthetic fibres such as rayon come to replace cotton, thereby removing farmers from the equation altogether (Goodman, Sorj and Wilkinson 1987; cf. Prudham 2005: Ch. 1).

Constraints posed by natural cycles have also been tempered through capitalist innovation. Industrial animal farming operations are using growth hormones, antibiotics and other artificial means to produce meat in as efficiently a manner as possible, as discussed by Boyd (2001) in his analysis of the acceleration of the biological productivity of broiler chickens (cf. Weis 2013). Additionally, the issue of fluctuating demands for labour-power based on seasonal cycles has been dealt with for decades through the use of migrant workers and contract gangs, with capitalist farming operations compelling labourers to shift themselves to wherever opportunities for their exploitation arise (McLaughlin and Weiler 2016; Mitchell D. 1996; Reid-Musson 2017). Brookfield and Parsons (2007: 50) call this class of workers “the modern proletariat.” As for the issue of farmland being fragmented in parcels, capital has increasingly found ways to profit from agricultural land, not only through ‘land grabbing’ in the global south (Rosset 2011), but also through speculative investments in northern countries such as Canada (Desmarais et al. 2015; Sommerville and Magnan 2015), and through credit mechanisms that leave farmers indebted to financial institutions (Henderson 1998).

These trends, and the historical debates within agrarian political economy about the countervailing persistence of non-capitalist social relations in agriculture, point to ways in which the broader structural context of capitalism operates on and helps to shape agricultural production more specifically. Together, they suggest that the question may not be one of ‘capitalism or not,’ but rather, of forms of articulation of capitalist accumulation with non-capitalist relations of agrarian production. They also point to ways in which non-capitalist production, even when it persists, is
progressively conditioned, constrained or otherwise limited by insertion into broader competitive
dynamics of generalized capitalist commodity production and circulation. These dynamics (and their
conceptualization in the agrarian literature) are highly germane in thinking about the challenges
facing those who would embrace alterity in farming, including, for example, through the use of
agroecological practices.

Kloppenburg (2004: Ch. 2) has effectively summarized and also contributed to the conceptualization
of this broader structural context in helpful ways through his identification of the means by which
farmers become subject to the dynamics of capitalist production and competition. This happens, at
least in part, by means of farmers’ dependence on purchased inputs via the dynamics of
appropriation discussed above. Over time, the prevalence of purchased inputs (e.g., chemicals,
machinery, seed, credit, etc.) has indeed tended toward the ‘hollowing out’ of on-farm production,
while also making ostensibly independent farmers economically or structurally dependent. They
must raise enough revenue to be able to continue to purchase these inputs (and pay off associated
debts), which in turn places commercial pressure on the farm operation to be profitable. This type
of reliance of independent farms is in fact characteristic of the ‘petty commodity’ producing
enterprise, a descriptor and analytic that Kloppenburg, drawing on Marx, has used to conceptualize
systemic dynamics in the farm sector.\(^\text{24}\) Many farmers in North America are essentially petty
commodity producers even if they own and operate their own farms, and even if and when they
attempt to avoid prioritizing profit as an end unto itself, because of their reliance on commodity
inputs to the farming enterprise. If the costs of those inputs go up, farmers need to generate more
revenue or attempt to produce the inputs themselves. Larger purchases such as farm equipment or
land itself may make farmers beholden to creditors, deepening the imperative to generate revenue.

\(^{24}\) See also Bernstein 2010: Chapters 6 and 7; Bernstein and Byres 2001.
At the same time, commodities that farmers produce are subject to competitive forces that tend to drive down prices over time, particularly in increasingly integrated global markets.

Combined, these tendencies can create a cost-price squeeze that threatens the economic viability of the farm, propelling a search for increased profits through strategies such as the intensification of production and/or the expansion of scale in production. In turn, dependence on labour-saving and efficiency-increasing purchased inputs may deepen, resulting in a technological treadmill that results in the farmer being reduced to, in the words of John Davis, a “propertied labourer” (see Kloppenburg 2004: 30). These tendencies may be very difficult for individual farmers to resist in the absence of a willingness to exploit personal wealth or in the absence of external support from the state or other actors (e.g., Community Supported Agriculture schemes involving guaranteed income). Despite various strategies embraced by individual farmers to retain their independence and thus control over the socio-ecological practices of farming, articulation with and insertion into a broader capitalist context means that this independence is systematically constrained and prone to being eroded.

It is little wonder then that we have seen a progressive decline in the number of small-scale farmers worldwide over the years. In Canada, the number of farmers has dropped from 732,832 in 1941 to 193,492 in 2016, with farm consolidation happening concurrently: in 1941 the average farm size was 237 acres, whereas it is now over 820 acres (Statistics Canada 2012, 2016b, 2017d). Those farmers who are able to stay in business typically have to rely on off-farm employment to maintain a viable livelihood (Statistics Canada 2017b; cf. Brookfield 2008); and most of those who are persisting in practicing ecological production are only surviving due to farmers’ self-exploitation and/or through
the use of non-wage labour such as interns and volunteers and/or by hiring migrant or other underpaid labourers (Ekers et al. 2016; Ekers forthcoming; Weiler et al. 2016).

Ecological farmers thus tend to operate on thin profit margins, and are generally constrained by the broader tendencies under capitalist relations of production. They are competing in a global food system that offers consumers cheap food, produced through significant economies of scale. The first contradiction of capitalism, as noted above, means that people will tend to seek cheap food because the system tends to drive down workers’ wages as a means to keep production costs low. Of course, income inequalities must be considered, and there are those who can afford to purchase ethically and ecologically grown food at a premium; however, the farming methods that are producing this kind of food are unlikely to be scaled up if farmers continue to be compelled to compete with each other, while wealth in society is simultaneously concentrated in the hands of an increasingly small elite class.

To conclude, while there are important nuances to consider, if food issues are to be viewed through a political lens and approached accordingly, it is crucial to recognize that we are dealing with a capitalist food system. Exploitation, greed, and environmental degradation have certainly occurred under different political-economic systems, from feudalism to socialism, yet the functioning of capitalism means that the system will tend not to accommodate just and sustainable relations of production at any significant scale. With that in mind, it is important however not to be overly teleological about what lies ahead. As I discuss further in Chapter 5, I am quite sympathetic to Gibson-Graham’s (2006) perspective that capitalism should not be viewed in a totalizing or essentializing manner. It would be fatalistic and, frankly, somewhat debilitating to suggest that alternative economic relations cannot be established until capitalism is overthrown. In addition, as
Farshad Araghi has argued, “global de-peasantization is not a completed or self-completing process… Social classes do not simply end and die; they live and are transformed through social struggles” (quoted in Bernstein 2010: 88). This reminds us that, in the Canadian context, it will be important to acknowledge how farmers and other actors are differentially entangled in the capitalist food system. This will contribute to an understanding of the varying, and often divergent, interests of different classes of farmers in a country like Canada (Bernstein 2010, 2014), and of other food system actors such as agribusiness and retail corporations. A nuanced perspective such as this will also help to frame the opportunities and challenges associated with pursuing ecologically oriented farming given that capitalism is a system that habitually ‘underproduces’ nature, as argued above.

There are evidently significant questions that need to be addressed in terms of how ecological farming could not only persist but thrive, while also progressing in tandem with a shift away from capitalism. In light of the post-political condition that is manifest in food debates, the agrarian question is therefore essential today, as it can help to re-politicize the conversation and provide a reminder that the problems with Canada’s food system will not be solved by niche organic products, Fair Trade schemes, and farmers’ markets (see, e.g., Friedmann 2005; Goodman et al. 2012; Guthman 2008a, 2008b), as the cause of those problems is more profound—the entanglement of capitalism in agriculture itself.

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2.3 - Alliance building and counterhegemony:
Translating Gramsci across time and space

*From theory to practice and vice versa*

Recognizing that the functioning of capitalism itself prevents meaningful progress in terms of climate and food issues is only the first aspect of confronting the post-political condition. It is a far greater challenge to determine how to proceed from a practical, organizing standpoint. Indeed, engaging in the theories of political economy and ecology can risk leading to a sort of paralysis for those that would seek to contribute to profound socio-ecological change, as the scope of the issues are overwhelming enough without grappling with the question of how societies may embark on a paradigmatic shift away from capitalism altogether. It is important, therefore, that theorizing not lay out such lofty political ideals without pointing to possible paths that social movement actors may take to bridge radical goals with the grounded terrain of everyday struggle. I am convinced that the work of Antonio Gramsci provides the most useful foundation for taking up such a challenge. I will therefore outline some of the key concepts advanced by the theorist, particularly those developed throughout his *Prison Notebooks*, a collection of essays and political musings that he laboured on while imprisoned by Italy’s fascist regime from 1926 until his death in 1937.

Scholars have likened Gramsci’s (1971, 1992) *Prison Notebooks* to a “textual labyrinth” (Thomas 2009a: 41-43; cf. Borg, Buttigieg and Mayo 2002; Buttigieg 1992). Written and revised over his eleven years of incarceration, Gramsci’s collection of notes are somewhat fragmentary, but are also challenging in that they are replete with historical references (e.g. concerning the processes that unified Italy as a nation-state during the Risorgimento [‘Resurgence’] from 1815 to 1871), as well as commentaries on global events he was observing (e.g. the rise of American Fordism, the Great
Depression, and the implementation of the first Soviet Five Year Plan) (Gramsci 1992). The range of Gramsci’s reflections, however, had a direct political purpose. He wanted to understand how Mussolini’s fascists were able to come to power in 1922, gaining the implicit consent of Italy’s bourgeois classes, and how the rise of this reactionary party could be informed by contrasting it with events that had occurred elsewhere, most notably including the French Revolution that saw the Jacobins unite various social classes in order to achieve victory (ibid.). He wanted, in short, to know how an understanding of the causes of the conundrum he, and Italy, were facing might be used to advance a communist revolution. Gramsci’s writings were therefore centred in a philosophy of praxis (see Loftus 2013); they were at once theoretically innovative and also very much grounded in practice. This was demonstrated by the fact that Gramsci drew on political, historical and popular sources to inform his work, while also reflecting on the organizing and journalistic activities in which he had engaged in Turin, as a leader within the Communist Party, prior to his arrest (Buttigieg 1992; Gramsci 1992).

With this in mind, it makes sense to begin with a brief discussion of the concept that is most often associated with Gramsci: hegemony. In developing the concept, he was clearly drawing on Lenin as an influence, however Gramsci’s discussion of hegemony was broader and more nuanced (Burawoy 2003; Mann G. 2009). For Lenin, it was about the potential for political domination, including the formation of alliances between proletariat and bourgeoisie in order to overthrow the ruling class (Mann G. 2009). Gramsci, on the other hand, positioned hegemony as a dialectical tension between domination and leadership, broadly understood, and the maintenance of political power through forms of consent and coercion that ran throughout the state and civil society. Hegemony thus included the factors that would allow a ruling class to gain the ‘spontaneous consent’ of the masses in society without having to resort to the use of force, as the fascists had been able to do in Italy.
Gramsci therefore dedicated considerable space in the *Prison Notebooks* to discussions on the role of education, religion, propaganda, and culture more generally, with regard to the establishment of hegemony. He stressed that

> the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership’. A social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to ‘liquidate’, or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force; it leads kindred and allied groups. A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise ‘leadership’ [i.e. hegemony] before winning governmental power… (Gramsci 1971: 57)

This quotation points to the relationship between hegemony and other important themes Gramsci discussed, including the relationship between state and civil society. For Burawoy (2003), Gramsci’s discussion of civil society contains one of his key insights in that it demonstrated that a ruling political party does not hold power in a vacuum; the state (or ‘political society’ as Gramsci sometimes called it) must engage with civil society generally in order to understand and maintain the ideological, economic and political grounds that support its dominant position. This notion of an intertwined political and civil society can be referred to as the ‘integral state’ (see Thomas 2009a). As Gramsci (1992) observed, in terms of the situation in Italy during his time, the prospect of replacing the fascists would entail developing a clear understanding of the mentality and goals of various groups in society, especially the ‘subaltern’ classes: the peasants and the workers in towns and industrial centres. In this regard, he was clearly impressed that the Jacobins’ had been able to bring together a diverse range of social groups—from the peasantry to economic elites—even though this resulted in what can be described as a ‘bourgeois’ revolution (ibid.).

Alliance building is therefore an important theme in Gramscian thinking about praxis. Bringing together diverse groups under the common goal of societal and governmental change is a key aspect of establishing an alternative (or ‘counter-’) hegemony. Gramsci (1992, 2015) wrote of the potential
for the establishment of a new ‘historic bloc’ that would be in a position to take power when the dominant regime’s hegemonic framework is thwarted and the subaltern classes have prepared the way for a new social consensus through a long-term, ‘molecular’ transformation. Thus, in addition to thoughtful strategizing on how to permeate popular consciousness with a new cultural hegemony (see Hall 1986, 1988; Jackson Lears 1985), Gramsci saw that it was essential that broad-based alliances be formed across geographic and social lines.

This perspective is particularly evident in his essay *Aspects of the Southern Question* (or simply, *The Southern Question*), which was written just before he was incarcerated and then published in 1930 (Gramsci 2015). In the essay, Gramsci drew attention to the need for communists and workers in the north of Italy to align with peasants of the south in order to overcome the ‘agrarian bloc’ and other social forces that were perpetuating the capitalist status quo. He discussed in particular an example of rather unlikely solidarities that emerged between Italian soldiers from the rural south who were brought in to violently suppress a movement of striking urban workers in the north (ibid. cf. Featherstone 2012). When a number of the soldiers (who as former peasants would have typically been very antagonistic towards the labourers) discovered that they were from the same geographic region as many of those on strike, they developed a bond with the workers and subsequently repudiated their military duties (ibid.). These kind of social and place-based formations are thus crucial to the establishment of a new historic bloc, particularly when the goal is not just to unite for the duration of a short-term campaign or issue-based struggle, but to ultimately win governmental power as a means to occupy and transform the capitalist state.

For Gramsci, the possibility of unifying assorted social groups had to be informed by an understanding of the role of intellectuals in relation to hegemony. He argued that, while everyone is
an intellectual in the sense that all work requires a degree of intellectual capacity, only certain
individuals and groups “have in society the function of intellectuals” (Gramsci 1971: 9). He
distinguished between ‘traditional’ intellectuals, who could be identified along professional lines (e.g.
lawyers, scientists, and literary specialists), and ‘organic’ intellectuals, who were typically more overtly
motivated by class interests and who could be ‘developed’ from within the working class. Notably,
Gramsci (1971: 6-15) argued that the peasantry does not ‘elaborate’ its own organic intellectuals and
that, even though other social groups could potentially draw their intellectuals from among the
peasants, this class was, in his mind, often subordinated to (and resentful of) intellectuals in towns
and rural areas (such as notaries and priests). 25

These arguments about the social function of intellectuals complement Gramsci’s general
discussions of the importance of education, culture and ideology. He did not, for example, see
education as being strictly confined to spheres of formal training, such as vocational and technical
schools, but rather stressed that learning is a process of labour—one that could help social groups to
“[develop] the appropriate attitudes” if the “aim is to produce a new stratum of intellectuals”
(Gramsci 1971: 43). By ‘appropriate attitudes’ we can take Gramsci to mean the ‘good sense’ that
subaltern classes must develop if they are to overcome the ideologically driven hegemony that buoys
the ruling class (Gramsci 1971). Good sense is not necessarily rational or scientific, but it is practical
rather, and contrasts directly with what Gramsci called ‘common sense’—the uncritical and
unconscious ways in which the masses come to understand society in accordance with the dominant
hegemony. “[C]ommon sense is a collective noun, like religion,” Gramsci (1971: 325-326) stressed;

25 As will become clear in the remainder of this dissertation, in the context of my research on ecological farmers in
Canada, I disagree with Gramsci in that this group clearly can develop and has developed its own organic intellectuals. Of
course, Canadian farmers are differentially positioned, economically and socially, than the Italian peasants of Gramsci’s
day. I discuss these issues further in Chapters 4 and 5.
“[...]here is not just one common sense, for that too is a product of history and a part of the historical process.”

The various concepts described here underline that Gramsci saw power as diffuse, spread throughout civil society (see Ekers and Loftus 2008), as the ruling party often relied on consensual relations rather than the use of force to maintain its position. Therefore, for groups aspiring to wrestle political power away from those in government—assuming that they were not in a position to start an actual revolution (a ‘war of manoeuvre’ in Gramsci’s terms)—a great deal of work had to be done to establish an alternative hegemony, via a ‘war of position’ (Gramsci 1992). From Gramsci then, we can appreciate that his commitment to partisan politics and involvement with the Communist Party in Italy was twinned with other forms of organizing and intellectual work, as he saw politics and radical change as a broad process of social transformation. Thus, while he dedicated a full essay, The Modern Prince, on the role of the Communist Party and its potential to unite subaltern classes in an effort to take state power, he also emphasized the educational, intellectual and cultural spheres in which struggles would need to take place beyond the world of partisan politics. In other words, Gramsci held formal political organizing and the potential for ‘mass spontaneity’ in dialectical tension, insisting that the door could not be closed on the latter given the importance of ongoing organizing of organic intellectuals who were engaged in the war of position (ibid.). Gramsci was therefore in favour of a more democratic approach than that proposed by Lenin, who advocated for the vanguard party to take the lead in directing various classes toward revolution (Mann G. 2009).

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Translating Gramsci

In order to apply the theories that Gramsci developed to contemporary and place-specific situations, it is necessary to ‘translate’ his ideas within a given context—or, as some scholars have put it, to travel “with and beyond” Gramsci by taking up his theories through praxis and, when necessary, by further developing his insights (Kipfer and Hart 2013; cf. Ives and Lacorte 2010). This process of translation is at once an intellectual and a political act. It is intellectual in that Gramscian notions can be adapted to struggles that did not exist in his time, such as the fight to halt and reverse climate change. In fact, although Gramsci wrote about the dialectics of nature in places, he did not centrally deal with what we would today consider to be environmental issues—therefore some work is necessary to reveal the various insights that can be gleaned by applying his ideas to the field of political ecology (Ekers et al. 2013—see esp. Loftus 2013). Similarly, despite the fact that Gramsci was very attuned to the role of the peasantry and agrarian politics in Italy’s south during his day, his theories must be reworked in a sense if they are to relate to the current dynamics of food and agricultural issues, and the particular challenges that are present under a corporate food regime. To date, although there are exceptions (e.g. Andrée 2011; Jakobsen 2018), scholars have generally not engaged with Gramsci’s ideas in analyzing food system issues, therefore I hope that this dissertation makes some helpful inroads in that respect.

The act of translating Gramsci is also political. In the midst of the post-political condition described above, the interest he demonstrated in linking theory and practice (through praxis) can serve as an important corrective to popular and scholarly debates that do not take up root causes of contemporary problems (e.g. ecology and culture under capitalism), as well as those approaches that focus entirely on critique without adopting a propositional stance in terms of how to move forward. As Harvey (2006: xxii) has noted, “a politics that evades [the] central contradictions [of capitalism]
can only ever address symptoms.” Further to this notion though, it is essential to not only establish political clarity in terms of structural problems, but also to posit practical ways for diverse actors and social groups to address those problems as they strive to build an alternative political-economic system. Gramsci’s ideas can be taken up in terms of both of these challenges. For one, he was not only antifascist but also anticapitalist, and he painted a clear picture of the diverse socio-cultural forces that can contribute to the dominance of a capitalist political economy. At the same time, the application of his theories to the contemporary moment provides an indication of the kinds of actions—e.g. those associated with alliance building, educational and cultural work—that may help with the establishment of a new hegemony.

Yet, while a Gramscian analysis can be very relevant to current struggles, it is important to acknowledge the vastness of the challenges with which today’s organic intellectuals are faced. Firstly, neoliberal capitalism is so deeply embedded that shaking its hegemonic foundations will be a tremendous undertaking. Gramsci would have referred to a ‘passive revolution’ in describing how the ruling classes, over the last four decades, have globalized the understanding that ‘there is no alternative’ to the current economic order. While he associated the ‘war of position’ with positive connotations, for Gramsci a passive revolution was one in which dominant hegemonic apparatuses were used to entrench, including through reforms, the modern bourgeois state (Coutinho 2012: Ch. 6). This is exactly the kind of process that has taken place in recent years as, for example, organized labour has been undermined, barriers to capitalist accumulation have been removed, and corporations have subverted democracy. The extent of the hegemony that underpins the current state of affairs is evident in both ubiquitous liberal economic arguments (e.g. the assertion that raising corporate taxes would send companies fleeing to other jurisdictions, thus working against ‘everyone’s’ interests), and the fact that, discursively, neoliberal capitalism is most often referred to
simply as ‘neoliberalism’ (suggesting that even critics have learned not to associate recent trends with more generalizable systemic contradictions).

A second great challenge is the fragmented nature of organizing within what is commonly referred to as ‘the Left’ in countries such as Canada. Gramsci’s emphasis on the importance of alliance building takes on a whole new meaning when one considers that ‘new’ social movements are often centred on rather specific issues or on identity-based politics (Della Porta and Diani 2006; Tilly and Wood 2013). Harvey (1996) has discussed the problem of ‘militant particularism,’ when one group (e.g. a labour union) focuses so narrowly on its specific interests and geographic context that it fails to see opportunities to generalize is struggles by aligning with other groups and adopting a more global ambition. To be sure, particularist struggles are tremendously important and deserve the attention of dedicated activists, however the challenge is to align these specific efforts with those that will address broader systemic problems. Militant particularism compounds as a problem when disadvantaged groups consistently fail to recognize shared class-based interests, or when, for example, feminists, environmentalists, anti-racist groups, LGBTQ activists, and anti-poverty organizations unwaveringly work in isolation. Part of the reason that militant particularism is so profound today has much to do with the dynamics of post-politics described above, and specific features such as the non-profit industrial complex and the nature of charitable funding within it. It is important, therefore, for organic intellectuals to take stock of these realities if they aim to counter the siloed approach that is very often taken in tackling important issues (including food sovereignty and climate justice!), and to strategize instead on how a collective approach may complement those particular struggles, and lead to the formation of a new historic bloc.
To be clear, I do not mean to dismiss in any way existing social movements. Some very valid critiques have been levelled at post-political scholarship in terms of the potential for it to imply that any movements that are not overtly anti-capitalist are fundamentally misguided, wasting their time on futile reforms (see Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). This is not my position at all. In fact, a Gramscian approach offers a way to meaningfully analyze social movements’ constraints and opportunities, by pointing to the good sense that runs throughout these movements’ struggles, while situating them in relation to existing socio-political conjunctures. As Loftus (2014) argues, contrary to the opinions of some scholars, Gramsci’s works and approach can be very helpful for those who would seek to counter the post-political condition through praxis. This is because Gramsci had a firm grasp of ‘the political,’ informed by the organizing of urban factory councils to which he contributed, practically and intellectually, following the First World War (Loftus 2014; Thomas 2009b; Trudell 2007). He was clear that politics must be understood relationally, along with economics and culture, and situated from historical and geographical perspectives.

As such, it seems likely that Gramsci would be the first to appreciate that, in the current hegemonic moment, overt anti-capitalist organizing could easily be stymied. Canada today is quite different from the Italy of 1919 to 1920, the ‘red years’ in which a revolutionary fervour was sweeping the country as civil unrest grew (Trudell 2007). At the same time, a Gramscian approach demands that one prioritize the “absolute secularisation and earthliness of thought,” meaning that an understanding of social movements and other forces in civil society should be grounded, informed by existing organizing and activism as much as theory (Loftus 2014; Thomas 2009a). In this regard, a Gramscian praxis has something unique to offer that is not found in more detached or retrospective scholarly approaches and social movement literature focused more on theory than driving social change (see Carroll and Ratner 2010; Carroll and Sarker 2016).
2.4 - Methodology: Movement-relevant scholarship and Participatory Action Research

Taking up the role of organic intellectual

The vast challenges associated with establishing an alternative hegemony in a deeply entrenched neoliberal capitalist society certainly come into play in terms of academics who wish to contribute to the praxis of a war of position. As someone who has aimed to take up the role of scholar-activist, I have become aware of both the constraints and opportunities associated with such counterhegemonic struggles. I relate those here as a means to tease out the tensions between the world of the academy and the terrain that would more traditionally be associated with the manoeuvring of organic intellectuals (i.e. wherein individuals contribute to alliance building and class-/place-based movement building). I focus first on some of the challenges identified in the existing literature on ‘movement-relevant’ or activist scholarship, relating these to observations from my fieldwork experience, before discussing insights in relation to the specific opportunities evident in adopting this kind of methodology.

To begin with, it is important to note that what is often called movement-relevant scholarship overlaps with other terms that scholars have used to describe the kind of engaged research that I have undertaken—from ‘collaborative research’ (Routledge 2001) to ‘critical praxis’ (Blomley 2008). It describes academic work that not only seeks to understand a social movement and the various actors and networks involved, but to also contribute to the movement in question—both theoretically and practically (see Fuller and Kitchen 2004; Hale 2008). As Bevington and Dixon
(2005: 198) emphasize, such an approach involves “start[ing] by locating the issues and questions of most importance to movement participants.” They also note that “it is also possible for scholars to produce relevant research on issues that have not been highlighted by movement participants,” however ongoing dialogue with the actors within the movement is crucial (ibid. cf. Greenwood 2008).

In this light, movement-relevant scholarship is also very much in line with participatory action research (PAR) (Kindon et al. 2007; cf. Kesby et al. 2005). Although PAR approaches and methods vary, my project shared several key characteristics with research identified in this category. Broadly speaking, participatory action research:

- “Treats participants as competent and reflexive agents capable of participating in all aspects of the research process
- Is context-bound and addresses real-life problems […]
- Involves participants and researchers in collaborative processes for generating knowledge
- Treats diverse experiences within a community as an opportunity to enrich the research process [and…]
- Measures the credibility/validity of knowledge derived from the process according to whether the resulting action solves problems for the people involved and increases community self-determination” (Kindon et al. 2007: 14)

With these points in mind, it is worth highlighting that it is not necessary to view PAR as a delimited process, in which a research project seeks to address a fairly specific problem in a time-bound manner. The fact that food sovereignty and an ecological system of food production in Canada are distant goals, for example, does not occlude them from being situated at the centre of a PAR project. My dissertation project can therefore be considered as part of a longer-term research trajectory, which is particularly important given the systemic issues that need to be addressed if food
sovereignty and agroecology are to be realized in this country. In this sense, from a Gramscian perspective, I see myself as aspiring to be one among many organic intellectuals within the NFU, Union Paysanne, and their allied groups. The positioning of movement-relevant scholarship in relation to counterhegemonic struggles thus casts PAR in a different light—as not just a short-term endeavour—and it therefore demands more of a commitment from scholar-activists wishing to engage in such projects.

Personally, when I was developing my research proposal in early 2015, I had virtually no direct connections to the NFU or Union Paysanne. I had signed up as an ‘associate’ or ‘citizen’ (non-farmer) member of both the NFU and Union Paysanne when I discovered that such a thing was possible while completing my Master’s thesis; however I had only met a few people who were involved in either organization. It was therefore not possible for me, practically speaking, to identify specific questions prioritized by farmers active within the NFU and Union Paysanne before beginning my research project. I was confident, however, that my interest in seeing food sovereignty and agroecology advanced from beyond the margins of the Canadian food system would resonate with members of both organizations, and I was convinced that it was important to raise some issues that were apparently not already a focal point for these movement actors. Specifically, these issues revolved around the questions I had about addressing food sovereignty within a capitalist framework, and the potential for increased alliance building to contribute to the success of food sovereignty proponents.

In the course of conducting my research, I came to realize that the questions I was raising were certainly relevant to the organizations and actors with whom I became increasingly connected, but also that there are specific challenges associated with attempting to take on the role of an organic
intellectual as an academic. One challenge has to do with the emphasis often put on the need for scholar-activists to constructively and effectively offer critiques of the movement participants in question (Blomley 2008; Mosse 2006). My hope is that, in the chapters that follow, I have fairly represented the limitations of—and obstacles facing—the food sovereignty proponents that I have focused on, including by distinguishing between some challenges that are intractable and others that may be more manageable. However, I am aware that, as an academic, I maintain a particular positionality and there is less at stake in many regards for me than there is, for example, for a farmer who is embedded in the Canadian agricultural system and whose livelihood depends on the success of their day-to-day on-farm operations. As scholar-activists such as Dawn Morrison (2017) have noted, even academics who seek to contribute to a given movement have the advantage of benefiting from a research project regardless of particular outcomes, as it will likely advance their careers and perhaps help them secure relatively lucrative positions within the academy (see also Morrison and Brynne 2016).

This tension in terms of vocational differences between scholar-activists and other movement actors should not be underestimated. For one, even the most committed scholar-activist will still face the pressures that come with their being situated within the academy, including expectations to publish within scholarly journals (as opposed to more accessible outlets), to conform to the parameters set by academic grants, and to teach and participate in other activities that will limit the time one can put toward more movement-based activities and organizing (Fuller and Kitchin 2004; Wakefield 2007). These challenges were certainly apparent to me as I worked toward the completion of my dissertation while also striving to contribute in practical ways to the work of the NFU and Union Paysanne. As some authors have observed (e.g. Chatterton et al. 2007), some of the most beneficial contributions that activist scholars can make are the specific non-academic contributions that are
centred on concrete forms of activism, and this is particularly true when it comes to working with farmers, who tend to work very long hours throughout the year and thus can find it hard to make time for activist pursuits. As discussed in more detail below, I have found that I have been able to participate in practical organizing efforts—from co-writing press releases to facilitating meetings and conference calls—but the ongoing tension in terms of competing scholarly and activist demands exists nonetheless.

A second point must be raised with regard to organic intellectuals’ vocational differences, and it is one that builds on existing concerns about movement-relevant methodologies. Scholars have pointed to the need for scholar-activists to be conscious of the enactment of expertise that can often accompany academic work (Carr 2010; cf. Whatmore 2009). While groups may be happy to have a scholar working with them who has the time and resources to engage in research of mutual interest, for the scholar to take on the role of ‘expert’ in such a relationship can be problematic to say the least—and he or she can even run the risk of being perceived by outsiders as a figurehead of the groups in question (Routledge 2001). While getting to know farmers throughout the course of my research, it became apparent that this concern is top-of-mind for some of them, as non-farmers—and especially academics—can sometimes fall into a position of speaking for farmers. Therefore farmers are sometimes deprived of the opportunity to represent themselves, in their own voice, or they may be misrepresented altogether.

Of particular concern from a Gramscian perspective, is that while there are certainly class-based divergences between different groups of farmers (Bernstein 2010), academics also inhabit particular class locations; thus there is a heightened need for reflexivity among scholar-activists hoping to contribute to counterhegemonic struggles. In other words, while it can be said that the role of
organic intellectuals is to build alliances and collaborate in working towards goals based on the interests of subaltern classes, it is essential to recognize that academics (despite facing potential challenges associated with the neoliberalization of the university; see Fraser and Taylor 2016) are likely to come from a place of relative privilege, and therefore it should not be taken for granted that their interests align with the groups with whom they are working. This means that scholar-activists must be aware not only of the likelihood of them being perceived as experts and afforded a higher degree of social capital than, for example, farmers, but also of the potential for a successful war of position to actually run counter to the benefits that academics enjoy within a capitalist education system.

I raise these points not because I can offer a solution to these potentially significant problems. Rather, I am convinced that a Gramscian view of movement-relevant scholarship calls for a higher degree of reflexivity on the part of an academic than is typically stressed in the literature on these methodologies. This is particularly true given that a scholar-activist may not be conscious of a divergence between their ultimate goals and interests and those of the communities with whom they are working, and—to complicate matters—this conflict may not actually arise within the span of a given research project. Graduate students, for example, tend to live a more precarious existence than tenured professors, but there is certainly a chance that their radical critiques and innovative activist methodologies may become more compliant with the dominant hegemony as they advance in their careers. To be sure, there is a role to play for those formally perceived as intellectuals in response to particular socio-ecological crises and to the post-political condition in general (see Chomsky 2016: Ch. 1); however the concept of the organic intellectual as I see it demands that one bridge theory and practice in a way that contributes to a longer-term societal shift away from capitalism. In this
light, scholar-activist work becomes a means to an end that may in fact disrupt the academy as it is currently known, and that may certainly make more conformist academics uncomfortable.

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**Methods: Getting our academic hands dirty**

Having discussed the various tensions and challenges associated with movement-relevant scholarship, in this section I will focus more on the opportunities connected with this kind of academic work, and I will relate my observations to the specific methods I employed while conducting my research. I wish to stress that, while my research methods (e.g. interviewing and conducting participant observation) are not necessarily linked with scholar activism, they certainly can be; and my experiences demonstrated that such an approach can in fact profoundly enhance these traditional research activities, while also presenting the researcher with added responsibilities as an aspiring organic intellectual.

My research formally took place over the course of approximately two years, beginning in the summer of 2015, although it can be difficult to specify an exact ‘end point’ to the research portion of a dissertation project when one is engaged in more activist-oriented scholarship. This is because a researcher that is involved in movement-related activities has increased opportunities to ‘member-check,’ or validate their research findings, with participants with whom they are connected (Cresswell 2003: Ch. 10), and to deepen their understanding of issues and organizations through their ongoing involvement in activism. My fieldwork however began in a fairly straightforward manner, as I carried out participant observation and interviews, starting with visits to three farms in Quebec. At those farms, I participated as a volunteer in hands-on activities, as I had connected with
the farmers in question through the Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) program. This gave me the chance, as someone from an urban background, to learn about the practical aspects of ecological farming, from techniques for maintaining soil fertility to methods of harvesting and marketing products. These experiences also afforded me the opportunity to improve my French-language skills, and to better understand the dynamics of Quebec’s agricultural system, which was important given the unique policy frameworks—and politics—that exist in that province (see Chapter 4).

In the end, my participant observation methods took me to 32 farms across Ontario and Quebec, with some visits consisting of brief farm tours while others could span from two days to three weeks. I structured my visits so that the longer stays took place in Quebec (given that I was already somewhat familiar with the Ontario context), in the regions of Outaouais, Montérégie and Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean; whereas the visits in Ontario were concentrated between the southwestern and eastern stretch of the province, with only two tours taking place further north, in the vicinity of Sudbury. The farms tended to be relatively small-scale, with the farmers I met cultivating approximately 9 acres on average, and most direct marketing their products, such as through farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, and direct sales to restaurants. The majority of the farms (19 in total) were focused on vegetable production, with some of them incorporating a mix of crops and livestock, however I also visited other types of farms (which tended to be larger—at approximately 150 acres on average), including dairy operations (goat and cow dairies), mixed livestock farms, grain farms, apiculture (beekeeping) operations, and maple syrup farms.

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26 See https://wwoof.ca
There was therefore breadth to my on-farm participant observation, but the depth of these experiences came from engaging in hands-on farm work alongside farmers, employees, and interns. Whether shovelling out a pig sty or spending hours on hands and knees manually weeding rows of onions, carrots, and spinach, one comes to appreciate—even if in a limited sense—the labour involved with farming. By this I am not only referring to the somewhat unglamorous aspects of farm work: These experiences also gave me a chance to understand the intellectual labour associated with ecological farming (from planning activities to drawing on extensive expertise to problem-solve around weather conditions, pests and the like). I documented these rich learning opportunities through detailed field notes, and I was particularly careful in recording themes and perspectives that arose during informal interviews with farmers and farm workers that I conducted while engaging in activities such as planting, harvesting, weeding, feeding animals, bailing hay, etc. These on-farm experiences were thus important in that they allowed me (again, an urbanite through and through) to come to understand ecological agriculture in concrete terms, rather than just in the abstract, but they were also helpful in two other respects. For one, they gave me the chance—in the spirit of scholar-activism—to reciprocate farmers’ generosity by contributing to their daily operations; and, secondly, these experiences facilitated and supplemented the semi-structured interviews that I carried out.

In total I completed 66 interviews with farmers and farm workers, and 3 interviews with non-farmer members of the NFU and Union Paysanne. The majority of these interviews (41) were semi-structured as I followed an interview guide and adapted my questions according to the responses and context, however the informal interviews (28) that took place while I carried out on-farm and event-based participant observation activities were arguably no less valid in terms of their contributions to my study. To be sure, the semi-structured interviews, which were recorded and transcribed, became a central part of my data analysis as I organized and coded information using
the software NVivo; but the fact that I had recorded my observations from the informal interviews in field notes meant that I could also include these in my formal data analysis. Informal interviews can also be less of a burden to farmers and farm workers, as they can provide insights without having to take time away from their work (see Kuehne 2016), and they also added to the diversity of my interview material given that the semi-structured interviews tended to take place with more active members of the NFU and Union Paysanne, whereas the less formal conversations often involved those who were not as engaged in those organizations (with a few of them not even being members). In terms of geography, there was a fairly even split among the 69 interviewees, with 33 being Union Paysanne members and/or farming in Quebec, and 36 being members of the NFU—of which 32 were situated in Ontario and 4 were farming in Manitoba, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Despite the fact that I had decided to constrain the scope of my research to Ontario and Quebec, I conducted these latter interviews because of the particular connections that farmers I met had to the subject matter I was exploring.

In addition to the time I spent on farms, I also figuratively ‘got my hands dirty’ by participating in various events that were either organized by the NFU or Union Paysanne, or gatherings frequented by their members. These events included, for example, regional or national conventions organized by one of these two organizations, conferences centred on the theme of ecological agriculture, and farmers’ organizing meetings. In total, I attended 19 such functions that ranged from one-day meetings to four-day conferences. While participant observation at events typically involves attending and taking detailed field notes based on targeted themes (which I did in these instances) (see Cook 2005), a scholar-activist approach can somewhat complicate, as well as enrich, the research experience. For one, it demands an added degree of reflexivity to observe participants when you are one of them. At some of these events, for example, I was a presenter—describing my
preliminary research findings and helping to lead discussions—whereas at others I participated as a non-farmer member of the NFU or Union Paysanne, contributing to (sometimes heated) debates on policy resolutions being considered by convention delegates.

Without a doubt, there are many academics in this country—such as a number of those involved in the Canadian Association for Food Studies (CAFS)—who explicitly seek to contribute to social movement activities focused on improving the food system (see Kneen C. 2011; Levkoe 2017); however, viewing participant observation through the lens of the role of organic intellectuals gives this research method a new meaning. The important aspect of documenting and understanding groups and processes is retained, but for an academic to increasingly contribute in these environments indicates that they will intentionally influence outcomes and dynamics at play. This is not surprising, as there is by definition a blurring of activism and scholarship when it comes to scholar-activism. From a Gramscian standpoint though, given the importance of alliance building in terms of the potential formation of a new historic bloc, scholar-activists who see themselves as organic intellectuals are striving to not only contribute to a delimited project but to the realization of alternative (counterhegemonic) socio-economic and political structures altogether.

In this sense, throughout my research activities I tried to maintain an awareness of my positionality as an aspiring organic intellectual, and the opportunities made possible through this stance. For example, I was sometimes able to provoke reflection among farmers in terms of their orientation within a capitalist food system, and capitalism generally, which other organic intellectuals involved in the NFU and Union Paysanne may not have felt as comfortable doing (or may not have prioritized given their focus on specific campaigns/issues). Therefore a counterpoint to the fact that movement participants may potentially perceive academics as privileged/outsiders (or ‘experts’ claiming an
undue amount of intellectual space) is the notion that scholar-activists can constructively critique and challenge certain groups and actors. In the case of my research, it became clear that some farmers—even if not incredibly prosperous financially—are relatively comfortable with the status quo. Raising prickly questions about the nature of capitalism and the need for systemic changes may provide a push for them to consider the situation faced by those who are more marginalized at present, and the potential advantages of contributing to counterhegemonic alliance building. I am certainly not the only aspiring organic intellectual who is able to contribute in this way, but the farmers I met who are in fact questioning and challenging the status quo seemed to appreciate my perspectives and participation.

Another key way in which scholar-activism can complicate and enrich participant observation is by opening up opportunities for an academic to engage in activism not directly related to a given research project. This was certainly the case for me, as I accepted invitations to get involved with the NFU’s International Program Committee and Union Paysanne’s equivalent, their Comité international. I also helped with the establishment of an Indigenous Solidarity Working Group within the purview of the NFU, and I have become active within the NFU-Ontario’s newly formed Toronto-York-Peel Local (therefore engaging at the most immediate level for decision-making and activism within the organization). Scholar-activism ideally always involves working with movement organizations in a way that avoids the paternalistic gestures that have at times been associated with academics historically aiming to ‘help others’ through their research (Speed 2008a, 2008b), however engaging more consciously as an activist opens up the possibility of contributing in ways that are far more practical and significant than the completion of a scholarly project. At the same time, while my interest in engaging in these various organizational activities has been sincere (and will continue), this engagement has undoubtedly benefitted me by helping me to better understand the processes
and systems that are constraining or overdetermining Canadian food sovereignty movement actors’ behaviours, as well as increasing my knowledge of the context in which these actors are operating.

While it is not expected that scholar-activism incorporate activities that are not directly related to a research project, engaging as an organic intellectual in some ways compels the broader kinds of activism mentioned here. In addition to participatory action research methods generally then, this approach thus increases the likelihood that a scholar’s theoretical insights will be informed by praxis; and, of course, the inverse is true in that their contributions may not only be practical in nature but also theoretically informed. Studying social movements can be a complicated affair (see Amenta et al. 2010), especially if one hopes to demonstrate the factors that tend to determine whether a movement will succeed or fail (Della Porta and Diani 2006; McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly and Wood 2013). Participating in a movement, however, both through and beyond the research process, may be the most important manner in which scholars contribute as organic intellectuals—constantly negotiating the interplay between theory and activism.

In sum, it can be incredibly important for a scholar to take on the responsibilities of being an organic intellectual, as I have tried to do. Organic intellectuals within a movement, such as some of the farmers I have met, characteristically step back from the immediacy of their daily struggles to analyze and advance their collective interests. These can be class-based interests as well as those that connect them to disparate social groups, whether or not there are existing alliances already established with those groups. Scholars taking on the role of organic intellectual, on the other hand, are often uniquely positioned to step into a social struggle and meaningfully engage while also carrying an outsider’s perspective on the situation at hand. The above-mentioned complexities and need for reflexivity notwithstanding, a Gramscian approach can thus enhance participatory action.
research; for one because it demands a commitment to the long-term politics of the given struggle, and secondly because the scholar can contribute theoretical reflection to a group’s praxis, while not muting any critiques they have of actors and approaches within the movement.

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2.5 - Conclusion

The post-political condition evident in common responses to both climate change and problems within the food system is particularly troubling when one considers the very political-economic processes and structures that are at the root of these issues. Understanding the workings of a capitalist ecology, and a capitalist food system more specifically—as articulated through the agrarian question—is central to taking up climate and food issues in a meaningful way. I have argued that the theories put forward by Antonio Gramsci have the potential to be incredibly useful in helping scholars and activists to begin thinking about and enacting alternative hegemonies that can underpin new ways of organizing ourselves economically and socio-ecologically.

The question of how academics can best contribute to such counterhegemonic endeavours is a significant one, and I have attempted to draw on my research experiences to articulate a vision of scholar-activism that is informed by the concept of the organic intellectual. There are certainly challenges to taking up this role, but I have hopefully made it clear that the benefits in engaging in this kind of scholarship can outweigh the risks. I would certainly not hesitate to encourage both emerging and established scholars to take a broader view of participatory action research by not seeing it as limited to a time-bound project, just as scholar-activism can and should sometimes bend much more toward activism than scholarship. Of course, the ugly face of the neoliberal university
may show itself periodically, threatening to restrain the activities of the organic intellectual within the academy, but scholars are not the only ones facing challenges posed by neoliberal capitalism; therefore these experiences may in fact be leveraged to build solidarity between academics and non-academics. There is no telling what potential there is for the establishment of a new historic bloc.
Chapter 3

Towards agroecology: The nascent movement for a climate-friendly agriculture in Canada

3.1 - Agroecology: A science, a practice and a movement

An emergent climate solution

The farm I am visiting, which is about an hour’s drive from Montreal, seems to be the embodiment of agroecology in many ways, however this is a term that the farmers, Rachelle and Antoine, would never use to describe their operations. Instead, they advise existing and potential customers that they are a certified organic farm, and sometimes mention that they are certified biodynamic as well. In terms of on-farm practices, agroecology is typically described in terms of methods that strive for food production to complement the ecosystem at hand, where biological and genetic diversity is fostered, soil organic matter is built, and chemical inputs are avoided (Altieri and Nicolls 2012; Gliessman 2015; Méndez et al. 2016). The farm in question certainly seems to be meeting those standards. Rachelle and Antoine cultivate just under 6 hectares of vegetables, providing an impressive 260 boxes of weekly produce to members of their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program during the warmer months, and 150 boxes in the winter. They also operate an on-farm store and sell their goods at weekly farmers’ markets on a seasonal basis.

27 Names of farmers changed for confidentiality reasons.
28 For information on biodynamic farming in Canada, see www.demetercanada.ca
29 About 14.5 acres.
As indicated in the previous two chapters, I am interested in this farm’s operations, and those of farms like it, because their production practices hold significant potential as a solution to climate change. Again, estimates suggest that 19 to 29 percent of greenhouse gas emissions are tied to our global food system (Vermeulen et al. 2012), and some research points out that these percentages may be even higher (GRAIN 2011). However, popular discourses often overlook the fact that agricultural production practices are much more important to address when it comes to climate change than, say, food transportation, which has gained considerable attention in recent years. It is clearly worth moving beyond efforts to re-localize food systems when one considers that “agricultural production, including indirect emissions associated with land-cover change, contributes 80% – 86% of total food system emissions” (Vermeulen et al. 2012: 195; cf. MacRae et al. 2013).

Thus, in spending time at Rachelle and Antoine’s farm, I am focusing on not just their marketing of a substantial amount of fresh produce to local people, but how they are growing the food.

Behind the productivity on this ecological farm is a good deal of technical expertise and hard work: the farmers need to foster suitable growing conditions for a wide range of vegetables—from carrots to kohlrabi—while avoiding chemical pesticides and synthetic fertilizers; they plan and oversee deliveries and other logistics of their operations; they raise a small number of mixed livestock, including cattle, pigs, chickens and geese; and they troubleshoot when any number of challenges arise, such as mechanical problems with the relatively antiquated tractor that they use. From a labour standpoint, the productivity of the farm is impressive because there are so few hands to make it all happen. In addition to Rachelle and Antoine, there are only three full-time seasonal employees and

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30 In this chapter I continue to use the term ‘ecological’ agriculture to refer to production practices that can fall along a broad spectrum, but which are noticeably more environmentally benign than those employed in industrial farming. All agriculture can be seen as ‘ecological’, as I have acknowledged, but I rely on this term given that it is used by many Canadian farmers, as well as organizations such as the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario (EFAO). As discussed in Chapter 1, the term is also less vague than ‘sustainable’.
one part-time employee, with only the added help of the occasional intern or two who complete short-term placements there. Yet, despite this small team, these growers are also part of a substantial network of farmers who regularly communicate to share technical expertise, which is also in-line with agroecology’s emphasis on farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing (Holt-Giménez 2006; McCune, Reardon and Rosset 2014). After long days in the fields, the farmers are disciplined about staying on top of email exchanges through a listserv run by a grassroots network of which they are members, the Réseau des joyeux maraîchers écologiques (RJME; the ‘Joyful Ecological Market Gardeners Network’).31 Through the RJME’s very active online forum, the farmers involved exchange advice about a wide range of technical issues, from the timing of planting certain crops and managing harmful insects to dealing with challenging weather patterns and seed saving.

Although I spent less than two weeks on this farm it made an impression on me, both in terms of growing practices that are in-line with agroecology and the fact that those practices seem to be considerably more ‘climate-friendly’ than conventional fossil-fuel driven agriculture. However, my interactions with Rachelle and Antoine also gave me pause to consider the substantial obstacles that they—and the nascent movement for agroecology in Canada—are facing. On the one hand, these farmers are quick to admit that while they have heard the word ‘agroecology’ being discussed at times, they are generally unfamiliar with the concept (Interview, Oct. 18, 2015). This raises important questions about an approach to agriculture that La Vía Campesina (2017b), along with a range of academics and public figures, have suggested is a key solution to a host of problems evident in the global food system (Altieri 2009; IPES-Food 2016; Snipstal 2015). These questions include: How does agroecology differ from other agricultural practices, and what is the benefit of advancing

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31 Field notes, Oct. 7-18, 2015.
this concept in particular?; and, What are the key barriers to agroecology being proliferated in the Canadian context?

On the other hand, from a climate change perspective, Rachelle and Antoine are clear about the fact that there are aspects of their on-farm activities that could be improved upon. For example, while they may avoid chemical inputs and sequester carbon by fostering healthy soils, they continue to rely on a diesel-fuelled tractor to prepare beds, manage weeds, assist with harvesting, and more.

Furthermore, in Antoine’s words,

> In terms of the consumption of fossil fuel-based energy, I’m not sure that our farm traps enough carbon to cover our overall release of greenhouse gases… Because we still use petrol to drive, we consume petrochemical products such as plastics, and we still buy products that have travelled to get here. So I’m not sure that our balance sheet is neutral. (Interview, Oct. 18, 2015)\(^{32}\)

Therefore it is also worth asking: What obstacles need to be overcome in order for farmers whose methods are ‘in-line’ with agroecology to meet even higher standards as a means to simultaneously feed people and fight climate change?; and, If these standards cannot be met, what are the advantages of and possibilities for an expansion of more common practices—such as organic agriculture—as a means to supplant industrial farming and the greenhouse gases that come with it?

In this chapter I tackle the questions outlined here by relating field observations and farmers’ experiences to literature on agroecology and the science of greenhouse gas emissions connected to farming. This includes an analysis of social movement perspectives on the potential for—and barriers to—agroecology in a capitalist food system, and the challenges that Canadian farmers are facing in terms of multiplying even relatively ecological production methods. I argue that an approach that takes up agroecology as counterhegemonic is required in this capitalist context, and

\(^{32}\) Quotes from interviews with Quebec farmers have been translated from French by the author.
that the greenhouse gas mitigation potential of ecological farmers provides a rationale for alliance building between these farmers and those engaging in the fight against climate change. I also argue for the utility of employing agroecology as a concept, particularly in that it uniquely highlights the need for an overlapping of on-farm practices, a social movement for food sovereignty, and agroecological science. I suggest then, that in addition to connecting food sovereignty struggles with those of climate activists and organizations (and vice versa), proponents of agroecology would do well to build broader alliances that will help advance agroecology in Canada. Such alliances should be aimed at tackling the political challenges currently inhibiting the spread of ecological farming in this country. As I discuss, these challenges include land access, food marketing, existing knowledge production regimes that favour industrial agriculture, and labour issues. On the labour question, I argue that agroecology struggles need to incorporate efforts to advance a just transition in agriculture—a term normally reserved for discussions of a shift away from fossil fuel-extraction industries.

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*Getting to the ‘sweet spot’*

Although the vast majority of Canadian farmers may be unfamiliar with agroecology, the term has actually been in use for many years. In fact, the first publication on the topic has been traced back to 1928, when Basil M. Bensin, a Russian agronomist who later worked in the U.S., published a book that discussed agroecology in relation to experiments in growing commercial crop plants (Wezel and Soldat 2009). Following in this vein, from the 1930s to 1960s, agroecology was generally understood as the application of ecology in agriculture, with many writers on the topic focusing on biological sciences (such as zoology), as well as agronomy and crop physiology (ibid). As resistance to
industrial agriculture emerged in the 1960s, however, the term gradually began to take on new meanings, and agroecology was increasingly discussed in relation to on-farm practices, as well as social movement struggles, by the 1980s and 1990s (Wezel et al. 2009). In 2003, Francis and colleagues offered this expanded definition of the concept: “We define agroecology as the integrative study of the ecology of the entire food system, encompassing ecological, economic and social dimensions. …The definition expands our thinking beyond production practices and immediate environmental impacts at the field and farm level” (Francis et al. 2003: 100; emphasis added; cf. Gliessman 2015).

This view of agroecology, while certainly broader than earlier interpretations, still maintains a focus on the role of researchers and scientists taking up the study of the ecology of food systems. In contrast, Wezel et al. (2009) described the development of agroecology along three distinct trajectories: as a science, a practice, and a social movement (see Figure 3-1). The authors argued that confusion can arise when agroecology is not clearly defined, as different actors are using the term in fairly divergent ways (ibid.).
This delineation of different meanings of agroecology is helpful, however it has also been critiqued, as practitioners have argued that the concept can, and should, also be taken up in overlapping ways; for example, when activist-oriented scientists aim to contribute to the work of social movements. In this light, Ernesto Méndez and colleagues have drawn parallels between agroecology and participatory action research (PAR), based on their experiences in designing and executing research projects that analyze on-farm practices (in countries such as Nicaragua and Mexico) in relation to issues ranging from gender dynamics to peasant livelihoods and intergenerational transfers of knowledge and land (Méndez 2017; Méndez et al. 2016; Méndez, Bacon and Cohen 2013). The results of this kind of research project can certainly have policy-related—and political—implications, depending on how the findings are mobilized.
Agroecology therefore need not be seen in an ‘either/or’ manner that contrasts the three separate approaches. As Figure 3-2 demonstrates (Méndez 2017), it is more effective to see agroecology as encompassing the potential overlapping of science, practice and movement. This perspective is provocative in that, while the concept may be productively pursued along any of these three lines, it suggests that the ‘sweet spot’ for agroecology will occur when there is a convergence of these approaches. As such, a more robust definition of the term is: “Agroecology is an approach that integrates ecological science with other scientific disciplines (e.g. social sciences), knowledge systems (e.g. local, indigenous), and activism to guide research and actions towards the sustainable transformation of our current agrifood system” (Méndez 2017, with my additions).

Figure 3-2: The ‘sweet spot’ of agroecology as the overlapping of its scientific, social movement-oriented and practical dimensions. (Image adapted from Méndez 2017)

33 With thanks to Ernesto Méndez for this framing.
Of course, arriving at a productive overlap of the three strands of agroecology can be easier in theory than in practice. For one, agroecology has in large part been institutionalized in many educational settings (in North America and beyond) in ways that do not facilitate an engagement with social movement actors (see Fernandez et al. 2013; Snipstal 2015). Secondly, peasants and farmers are often so occupied with their livelihoods that they do not have the time or the wherewithal to engage in either external or self-led research projects. And, finally, social movement actors such as La Vía Campesina (2015) often take up agroecology in relation to the struggle for food sovereignty, highlighting the political factors that need to be addressed in order for a more equitable and sustainable food system to be established; and while this is important work, place-based analyses of how agroecological systems may be implemented in different contexts can often be left for others to pursue.

To be sure though, the connections between agroecology and food sovereignty must be made if agroecology is to avoid being interpreted along overly technical and apolitical lines (Altieri 2009; Altieri and Nicholls 2012; McCune, Reardon and Rosset 2014; Snipstal 2015). As Haesook Kim, a member of La Vía Campesina, once stated, “Without food sovereignty, agroecology is only a technology; without agroecology, food sovereignty is only a slogan” (cited by Diaz, Snipstal and Wang 2012). This perspective was echoed in February 2015 at the International Forum on Agroecology that took place in Nyéléni, Mali, and which La Vía Campesina co-organized. In the final declaration that was published at the conclusion of the forum (LVC 2015), there is a clear link between agroecology, demands for agrarian reform, women’s rights, and struggles for the control of seeds, biodiversity and knowledge. The participants were also very forthright about the potential for agroecology to be co-opted if its social movement dimensions are minimized:
Popular pressure has caused many multilateral institutions, governments, universities and research centers, some NGOs, corporations and others, to finally recognize “agroecology”. However, they have tried to redefine it as a narrow set of technologies, to offer some tools that appear to ease the sustainability crisis of industrial food production, while the existing structures of power remain unchallenged. This co-optation of agroecology to fine-tune the industrial food system, while paying lip service to the environmental discourse, has various names, including “climate smart agriculture”, “sustainable-” or “ecological-intensification”, industrial monoculture production of “organic” food, etc. For us, these are not agroecology: we reject them, and we will fight to expose and block this insidious appropriation of agroecology. (ibid.)

This statement points to the challenge of agroecology being enacted through research, on-farm practices, and activism in ways that do not undermine its ability to be scaled out in order to begin to supplant industrial agriculture. Further, the risk of agroecology being co-opted or marginalized in capitalist contexts is particularly acute given that corporations are always ready to appropriate developing trends and incorporate them into regimes of profit accumulation (Friedmann 2005; Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013). Echoing Gramscian themes, Snipstal (2015) has pointed to the importance of alliance building to support an agroecological transition away from an agribusiness-controlled industrial agriculture. He mentions in particular the potential for civil society organizations and activist-scholars to help establish research alliances and political strategies to advance an agroecology that is tied to food sovereignty. What will be interesting to see, however, is whether such alliances and strategies can effectively counter the co-optation of agroecology about which La Vía Campesina is already concerned.

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3.2 - Seeing the unseen: Soil microbes and absent emissions

Ecological agriculture’s role in the fight against climate change can be broken into two broad categories: the first has to do with avoiding emissions directly or indirectly tied to fossil-fuel consumption, and the second relates to the potential to facilitate carbon sequestration in healthy soils. I will begin by discussing the first of these categories here, before exploring the second in the following section. In both cases, I will review the contributions that Canadian farmers are making, as well as the limitations and challenges associated with common practices in ecological agriculture.

Fossil-fuel avoidance by design

In visiting farms as I conducted my research, it became clear that one of the most significant contributions that ecological farmers are making to avoid greenhouse gas emissions is through their reliance on non-synthetic sources of fertility. Nitrogen-based fertilizers alone, which are a key pillar of industrial agriculture, are accountable for over 20 percent of greenhouse gas emissions connected to the global food system (Bellarby et al. 2008; Qualman 2016). This is due to the energy intensiveness associated with the production of these fertilizers through the Haber-Bosch process, and the nitrous oxide (N₂O) released when they are over-used and not taken up by plants (ibid.). In addition, these inputs are typically shipped great distances, adding to their carbon footprint (Vermeulen et al. 2012). Some farmers are clearly aware that avoiding these synthetic fertilizers contributes to a more climate-friendly agriculture, but, as one southwestern Ontario producer expressed, this awareness may not be shared by all:

I think a lot of organic farmers don’t understand the impact they’re having. Like, just not using nitrogen fertilizers, you know, that are made with huge amounts of natural gas… That’s why organic agriculture is so much more energy-efficient than conventional agriculture—Just that one item. And often that’s not appreciated… (Interview, Dec. 16, 2015)
This sentiment is significant as it underlines that, even if ecological farmers are not primarily motivated by a desire to avoid greenhouse gas emissions through their production practices, they are nevertheless doing it, including by adhering to the Canadian Organic Standards.

At the same time, while nitrogen-based fertilizers may be the most energy-intensive, avoiding other synthetic fertilizers is also important. The mining and production processes that generate potassium- and phosphorous-based fertilizers are also problematic from a carbon standpoint, and some farmers with whom I spoke are well aware of this. As one organic farmer in Outaouais, Quebec summarized, these processes contribute to “an ecological disaster… Potassium and phosphorous are mined [and] there is an energy-intensive process for rendering them soluble …so that they can be used as fertilizers… So, by using chemical fertilizers, [conventional] agriculture is a real factor in terms of climate change” (Interview, Sept. 9 2015; cf. Bellarby et al. 2008). In sum, the focus on replenishing macronutrients in soil (N, P and K) is an approach that is often described as “feeding the plant, not the soil” (Laing 2015). In contrast, ecological farmers must work hard to ensure that there are appropriate fertility levels in their soils—which includes a range of macro- and micro-nutrients, but also organic matter and required pH levels—without resorting to the use of chemical inputs.

The challenge, however, is for farmers to access sufficient quantities of non-synthetic fertilizers in an ecological and practical manner. Based on my field research, it is clear that few farmers can produce enough of their own fertility sources to meet their needs. Some grain and vegetable growers, for example, raise small numbers of livestock, which do provide nutrient-rich manure, however the quantities needed for their crop production means that they are compelled to source fertility inputs off-farm. Given that organic livestock operations tend to highly value the manure produced on their own farms, which they use for growing feed crops, organic grain and vegetable growers end up
connecting with conventional livestock operations to purchase cattle, chicken and pig manure. This practice of importing non-organic manure for use on organic farms is permitted within the Canadian Organic Standards, however several ecological farmers with whom I spoke clearly expressed a sense of unease about this reliance on inputs from conventional farms.

An alternative source of fertility is green manure, which refers to crops grown specifically to enrich the soils in which they are planted (i.e. they are not harvested as traditional crops). These can include, for example, clover, beans, and mixes such as oats and peas, which help to build organic matter and replace vital nutrients. Legumes, in particular, are beneficial for fixing nitrogen in the soil. The challenge for ecological farmers is the amount of land that would be required to meet their fertility needs, as land is taken out of production to grow these green manures. Similarly, farmers from the Maritimes with whom I spoke discussed using seafood-based fertilizers as an alternative to manure; yet, while these are often by-products from local fisheries, one can wonder how much sense it would make, from an agroecological perspective, to transport these fertilizers significant distances to farms that are not proximate to the ocean.

In addition to the question of fertilizers, there is the matter of pesticides. Synthetic pesticides are not only energy-intensive to produce and transport, but they also compromise the ability of soils to sequester carbon (discussed below), and until recently it was common for some (organochlorine) pesticides to actually contain hydrocarbons (see Pfeiffer 2006). Pesticides include herbicides, insecticides and fungicides, and industrial agriculture has thus made it relatively easy for conventional farmers to combat weeds, invasive insects and fungal problems that can significantly

34 Although pesticide production is not as energy-intensive as fertilizer production (Bellarby et al. 2008)
35 The signing of the Stockholm Convention (on Persistent Organic Pollutants) in 2001 helped reduce this problem, although countries that are not signatories to the convention (which includes the United States) may still use pesticides that contain petroleum-based chemicals.
harm, or limit the productivity of, their crops. Many farmers I have met are proud to report that they use no pesticides at all in their operations, even though some pesticides (generally dubbed ‘natural’) are listed as ‘permitted substances’ according to organic regulations. Other farmers have described developing their own pest and disease control systems, using native plant extracts and low-cost inputs. This can involve, for example, creating pesticides from plants that can be grown on-farm, such as mulberry, burdock, and milkweed, while plants such as dandelions can serve as ‘bio-indicators’ that can draw attention to mineral imbalances in soils.36

While these approaches are innovative, most ecological farmers first try to encourage a diverse ecosystem on their farm, so that there are ‘beneficial’ insects and insectivorous birds that will prey on any ‘invasive’ insects, just as they would monitor a situation that arises as opposed to preventatively spraying even a non-synthetic pesticide. Farmers will also use insect traps and trap crops as needed, with the latter referring to companion plants that can lure insects away from the main crop that is in production.37

There are, in fact, many ways that farmers avoid the use of synthetic pesticides (and thus associated greenhouse gas emissions), however there are drawbacks to some of these approaches. Many ecological farmers lament, for example, the fact that they must rely on plastics to help with weed suppression (instead of using herbicides). Vegetable farms will often feature raised beds that are covered in black plastic, which helps to capture heat and moisture in the soil while eliminating weeds. Farmers who are conscious about reducing their use of fossil fuels are often frustrated about the fact that this use of plastic seems to be unavoidable, especially since the plastic needs to be

36 Field notes, Feb. 20, 2016.
37 To build on an example mentioned in Chapter 1, eggplants (Solanum melongena) can function as a trap crop to lure Colorado potato beetles away from a row of potatoes (Both are in the nightshade family).
continually replaced, and even biodegradable plastic is problematic, and no longer permitted under
the Canadian Organic Standards. Similarly, while unrelated to pesticide alternatives, ecological
farmers have also expressed dismay about the fact that they must use plastic in other aspects of their
operations. As one farmer from eastern Ontario indicated,

You know, we’re a certified organic farm… but we go through a ton of plastic bags, and we
can’t really envision a scenario, with the direction the business has gone, to eliminate the
plastic. So, that’s a problem, but… salad greens, I don’t think, really would exist the way they
do without plastic. It was lettuce heads before, but no one’s buying them. (Interview, May
26, 2016)

On the same note, other farmers raised the issue of greenhouse plastic that must be periodically
replaced, while an organic livestock farmer was emphatic that he would love to find a way to make
silage (animal fodder that is not dried like hay) without wrapping the large bales in plastic.

Tractors, of course, are also permitted in organic farming, and they also help farmers to avoid the
use of pesticides, but nonetheless result in fossil fuel consumption. Ecological farmers I have met
are quite clear about the fact that it is not just a matter of them ‘also’ using diesel-fuelled tractors,
just as is done in conventional agriculture, but in fact they typically make more passes in their fields
with their tractors out of necessity. This is because ploughing is an efficient way, from a labour
standpoint, to till the surface of fields to eliminate weeds before crops are planted. Similarly, I have
ridden alongside a farm intern on a device attached to the rear of a tractor (known as a ‘Reigi-’ or
‘Eco-’ weeder), where we have sped up and down rows of vegetables using mechanized tongs to
weed in-between crops that were already planted. Some farmers also carry out ‘flame’ weeding,
which involves using propane torches (also often attached to a tractor) to burn weeds that have just
broken the surface of the soil before the crops themselves have emerged. None of these fossil-
fuelled practices are forbidden in organic agriculture, although, to paraphrase Antoine who I quoted
at the outset of this chapter, we can wonder whether these farmers’ carbon balance sheet is neutral.
The point in relating these examples, however, is not to diminish the fact that ecological farmers’ practices are, on the whole, considerably more climate-friendly than those common in industrial agriculture. Avoiding the greenhouse gas emissions tied to the use of nitrogen-based fertilizers is an enormous contribution on its own. It is important, however, to take an honest look at how organic, or otherwise ‘ecological’, practices may be improved upon—or, in other words, how these farmers may get closer to reaching their agroecological potential—particularly if agroecology may advance the fight against climate change in Canada.

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Capturing carbon

To continue on this theme, it is worth discussing the capacity for carbon to be sequestered on farms that foster healthy, ‘living’ soils, and agroforestry systems, as well as the challenges that come with these approaches. In Canadian ecological farming circles, it is apparent that discussions of carbon sequestration through climate-friendly agricultural practices have been gradually increasing in recent years.38 Scientific contributions to these discussions are also on the rise (e.g. Hartemink and McSweeney 2014; Lal 2004; Six et al. 2006) and, while further studies are required in order to measure and document the best practices that farmers are using in different contexts, there is clear evidence that the carbon sequestration aspect of ecological farming is an important component of agriculture’s potential to mitigate climate change. It has been suggested, for example, that a one-percent increase in soil organic carbon across all arable land (which totals 5.1 billion hectares around

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38 Both within Canada and beyond, in fact, there are organizations that are paying particular attention to the potential for ecological agriculture to contribute to carbon sequestration. For examples, see the work of Soil4Climate, Sols Vivants, 4pour1000, Regeneration International, The Soil Carbon Coalition, The Savory Institute and Drawdown.
the globe) would absorb all of the greenhouse gas contributions from agriculture since 1850 (Laing 2015). This is a remarkable claim, as the implication is that an even greater increase in soil organic carbon would compensate for climate change impacts not connected to agriculture; however, it is a claim that merits some explanation and discussion.

Carbon sequestration in this context, or the building of soil organic carbon, takes place through the ‘living’ members of a soil ecosystem, such as microbes and mycorrhizal fungi, consuming the ‘recently dead’, which is the active organic matter in the soil (Darby 2015). Carbon is in fact 58 percent of soil organic matter, and the regular processes through which these microscopic communities work lead to the sequestration of carbon through both shorter-term and longer-term cycles (Clark 2015). This means that ecological farmers need to ensure that there is a consistent supply of ‘food’ for these microbial organisms, including plant coverage year-round through successions of diverse annual crops, and through perennial crops. It is also important for there to be minimal disturbance to soil ecosystems, which is another reason for farmers to avoid spraying pesticides, and which is why those focusing on improving their soil health tend to strive for low-till or no-till approaches (Hargreaves 2015a, 2015b). These approaches are focused on maintaining undisturbed root structures in soils, as the 2-millimetre rhizosphere is a sensitive zone in soil ecosystems where much of the initial carbon uptake occurs.

The biology of these processes indicates why it is important to improve upon some existing practices in organic farming in order for ecological agriculture to maximize its contribution to fighting climate change. As indicated above, tractors are often used to perform manual weeding as a way to avoid chemical usage (which also helps with soil aeration and water retention). However, this approach, as with the use of non-mechanized implements to till soils, disturbs the rhizospheric and
microbial processes that help to sequester carbon in the soil. Similarly, even the act of harvesting annual crops is disruptive, meaning that short-term carbon cycles cannot do as much to mitigate climate change as can longer-term cycles based on perennial crops (Clark 2015; Lal 2004). Organic farming rules (under the Canadian Organic Standards) also allow for the use of some ‘permitted substances’ that can be quite detrimental to soil health. For example, farmers with whom I spoke were particularly alert to the negative effects on soils brought about through the use of copper as a fungicide (see Smith J. 2008), just as pyrethrin-based insecticides can be harmful even though they are derived from flowers.

As a result of such practices, and agriculture’s contemporary focus on annual crops, the building of soil organic carbon is a significant challenge. Some studies have suggested that approximately 250 tonnes per hectare of fresh organic matter are needed in order to arrive at a level of 23 tonnes of soil organic carbon per hectare, which is what is required in order for a farmer to increase the carbon in their soil organic matter by one percent (Clark 2015). Another way of articulating this challenge is by pointing to the fact that only 15 to 32 percent of carbon dioxide is captured in the humus (the active organic layer of the soil), which is why deeper, longer-term carbon cycles need to be encouraged in climate-friendly agricultural systems (Laing 2015). As indicated, shifting the focus of agriculture—even partially—toward perennial crops can be an effective way of increasing deep carbon sequestration in soils (see Gentile, Martino and Entz 2005), however even annual grain and vegetable producers are contributing in this regard through agroforestry.

Tree cover was one of the most noticeably different aspects of the agrarian landscape at ecologically oriented farms that I visited. Unlike conventional farms, where it is common to fill in and raze wetlands, and push fields out to the fence line in order to maximize production, ecological farms
tend to incorporate silviculture in their operations. This can be through the planting of trees—which had been done in the tens of thousands at one Ontario permaculture farm I visited—and through the preservation and management of existing forests on the property. At many annual-crop-focused farms, approximately one-quarter to one-third of the land is forested, which certainly adds to the carbon sequestration potential of their overall operations. In addition, ecological farmers are likely to have rows of trees surrounding their fields, which provide the additional benefit of acting as wind breaks that minimize soil disturbance. One grain farmer I interviewed remarked that it is astounding to see, at the end of the winter, snow in his fields mixed with layers of soil that has blown over from surrounding conventional farms that do not incorporate hedgerows, shelter belts, and cover crops. “So we’re building soil; we’re stealing everyone else’s soil… They’re giving it to us [in fact]! And soil is an inch every hundred years” (Interview, May 29, 2016). At farms like this and at least one other that I visited, it was impressive to see that, despite their focus on annual crops, fireflies (Lampyridae) were part of the biota of the farm, which is notable given that these beetles require soils that have been undisturbed for many months in order to thrive.

In sum, the ability of well-managed soils to help sequester carbon highlights what some farmers have referred to as a ‘biological revolution’ that is happening in agriculture. While the physical, chemical and biological compositions of soils are important in ecological growing (Darby 2015), in broad strokes it can be noted that agriculture has previously gone through a physical revolution (represented by a focus on machinery to till fields, plant seeds and harvest crops), and a chemical revolution (represented by the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers). In contrast, the biological revolution signals that farmers are paying more attention these days to the functioning of microbial
communities in soils, a trend that was demonstrated by the topical foci at various agricultural conferences I attended.\(^{39}\)

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The cow question

A discussion of the connections between climate change and agriculture cannot proceed without also addressing the role of livestock in the food system. There are both scientific reasons for this, and others that relate to popular culture and a rising awareness of what I am calling the ‘cow question’ here.

Scientifically, there is substantial evidence that the proliferation of Intensive Livestock Operations (ILOs) globally is contributing significantly to the problem of climate change. The United Nations, for example, has indicated that animal agriculture alone is responsible for approximately 14.5 percent of global greenhouse gases (Gerber et al. 2013). Scholars such as Tony Weis (2013) have notably drawn attention to this issue, articulating the astonishing rate at which we are witnessing the ‘meatification’ of diets around the world (especially in wealthier countries), and the concomitant expansion of ILOs, also known as Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) (cf. GRAIN 2017). The burden of industrially raised livestock’s ‘ecological hoofprint’ is largely tied to the fact that these animals (especially cattle, pigs and chickens) are no longer being raised on pasture, but are instead concentrated in feedlots, where the large quantities of faeces they produce is often collected is vast slurry lagoons, or ‘cesspools,’ that emit methane \(\text{(CH}_4\text{)}\) (Weis 2013; cf. Bouchard 2002). As a

\(^{39}\) As this is not referring to advances in biotechnology, this progressive schema—from the physical to the chemical to the biological—is a twist on Friedrich Engels’ (and later J.D. Bernal’s) observations about the succession of scientific developments historically, as discussed by Kloppenburg (2004: 21).
greenhouse gas, methane is said to have a ‘global warming potential’ that is 34 times that of carbon dioxide (over a 100-year period) even though it only remains in the atmosphere for approximately 12 years (Myhre et al. 2013). In addition, industrially raised animals are incredibly energy-inefficient sources of protein (and nourishment more generally) when one takes into account the quantities of grain being grown (also industrially) worldwide solely for animal feed (Gerber et al. 2013; Weis 2013). This is to say nothing of the deforestation that is taking place in order to make room for both CAFOs and vast fields of monocultural feed crops (ibid.).

Without a doubt, intensive livestock operations are problematic from a climate change perspective, however, in recent years, popular discourses around this fact have at times led to a simplified view of the role of animals in agriculture. In the words of Antoine, the Quebec farmer mentioned at the start of this chapter:

Greenhouse gases, yes, everyone knows more or less what they are. We associate them with cars and with industry, but not so much with agriculture. There are some people who you sometimes hear say that cows fart, so that creates a hole in the ozone layer, but that's mostly still a joke… Or at least it should be a joke. (Interview, Oct. 18, 2015)

In other words, when members of the general public do demonstrate an awareness of the links between agriculture and climate change, they are increasingly considering the role of livestock, although they may not have a solid understanding of the pertinent facts. Many ecological farmers that I interviewed expressed a degree of dismay about this trend, and one documentary film in particular was repeatedly referred to in these discussions: *Conspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* (Anderson and Kuhn 2014). Although there have been many critiques of animal agriculture in popular culture over the last several years (see Weis 2013: 6-7), this 2014 documentary has garnered an exceptional amount of recognition, with some media outlets reporting that many people are converting to veganism simply as a result of seeing the film (see, e.g., Homewood 2015).
In *Cowspiracy*, the filmmakers question why intensive livestock operations’ contributions to cumulative greenhouse gas emissions are apparently being overlooked. In particular, they target environmental non-profit organizations in the United States that are working on relevant issues, from biodiversity loss to energy consumption, but yet somehow avoid taking on the problem of animal agriculture and its connection to climate change. The conclusion drawn in *Cowspiracy* is that—apart from the potential risk of environmental campaigns about meat eating being seen as an affront to personal freedoms (in the context of the hegemonic prioritization of individual rights)—the industrial livestock lobby in the U.S. is simply too powerful to confront. With enormous profits being made producing and selling meat, corporations and industry associations will go to great lengths to prevent or quash criticisms directed at their business model.

While many of the points raised in the documentary are certainly valid, ecological farmers with whom I spoke were agitated about two issues that seem to be overlooked in *Cowspiracy* and the discussions it has generated: One is the potential for well-managed livestock operations to contribute to carbon sequestration, and the second is the larger role that animals can play in (agro)ecological farming systems.

On this first point, as noted above, the most effective building of soil carbon takes place in perennial systems, which includes grasslands. Thus when ruminants such as cows are raised on pasture they can, at least in part, help with fighting climate change. This is due to the fact that when these animals eat grasses and other herbs they help to stimulate their growth and continued absorption of carbon dioxide (before those plants brown and die off) (Clark 2015). On the one hand, this is notable because ruminants have the ability to convert grasses, which humans cannot digest, into food.
sources for people—and this can take place on lands that are unsuitable for other forms of agriculture (i.e. due to poor soil conditions). On the other hand, researchers such as Allan Savory (2013) have suggested that the carbon sequestration potential of well-managed ruminant operations is so great that, if half of the world’s grasslands were converted to what is called ‘high-intensive rotational grazing,’ global carbon dioxide levels could be returned to pre-industrial levels (cf. Savory 2017). The practice of rotational grazing is generally synonymous with ‘mob,’ ‘planned,’ or ‘adaptive multi-paddock’ grazing, and I met several members of the National Farmers Union (NFU) and Union Paysanne who are engaging in this form of livestock rearing on either beef cattle or dairy operations. Many of these farmers are in fact keen to raise animals in a way that helps to mitigate climate change, and one producer from Alberta hosted scientists at his farm whose research suggested that the benefits of ecologically raised cattle indeed seem to outweigh the contributions those cattle make to climate change through methane emissions (Informal interview, Dec. 7, 2015; cf. Teague et al. 2016).

On the topic of animals’ contributions to agricultural systems (beyond being sources of meat-based protein), many farmers will point to the role they play in terms of nutrient cycling. As discussed above, animal waste is an important alternative to synthetic fertilizers, and can logistically make more sense for farmers to rely on than either green manures or other sources of soil fertility. Nutrient cycling, and the view of a farm as more of a closed-loop ecosystem, demonstrates that the cow question is not just about cows. When mixed livestock are present in an agricultural system, they provide complementary benefits, based on the differential functioning of herbivores (such as cows, sheep and goats) and omnivores (such as pigs and chickens) (see Russelle, Entz, and Franzluebbers 2007). Scholars have discussed how the combination of (mixed) animal rearing and crop production is ideal for agroecological systems (Altieri and Nicholls 2012; Gliessman 2015: Ch. 19), just as some
farmers I interviewed focused on the need to re-integrate animals and crops as a key component of striving toward what they would define as sustainable agriculture. As mentioned by one producer who runs a vegetable CSA program but also keeps a small flock of sheep:

For me, environmentally sustainable agriculture certainly involves a much more complex and diverse agricultural landscape than I currently see in southwestern Ontario. I think we certainly need to put crops and livestock back onto the landscape in the same places. …I mean, nature doesn’t exist in a way where animals and plants are completely separate, and we can’t continue to do that on our agricultural landscapes. (Interview, Dec. 9, 2015)

This sentiment echoes that of Sir Albert Howard (2006[1947]: 63), whom I heard referenced at various ecological farming conferences, when he wrote in 1947 in *The Soil and Health: A Study of Organic Agriculture*: “[N]ever does Nature separate the animal and vegetable worlds. This is a mistake she cannot endure, and of all the errors which modern agriculture has committed this abandonment of mixed husbandry has been the most fatal.”

The evidence that supports the importance of mixed agricultural systems certainly challenges the notion that organic farms focused solely on livestock could be the peak of ‘sustainability.’ In particular, organic farms that raise one kind of animal, especially in large numbers, cannot be said to have achieved their agroecological potential. This was evident to me when I met an Ontario pig farmer at an agricultural conference who described his 1000-acre operation to me; over the course of a year, the farm was home to approximately 5000 animals that were raised and slaughtered.40

Similarly, some organic dairy operations in Canada feature several hundred cows, which requires a high degree of mechanization. To be clear, I do not espouse the ‘small is beautiful’ philosophy when it comes to agriculture. I fully agreed with a Quebec farmer I interviewed, when he stated firmly that he is not “dogmatic” about farm size, as he could easily imagine some very large farms being more ecologically sustainable than many smaller farms with which he is familiar (Interview, Sept. 9 2015).

However, for a farm to meet its agroecological potential, one can imagine how challenging it would be to incorporate a high-degree of plant and animal biological diversity when starting with a single species of livestock that numbers in the hundreds or thousands. On top of logistical issues, it was clear to me from visiting farms through the course of my research that it takes a high degree of expertise to incorporate many different elements into an agricultural operation, which is especially true when it comes to raising animals. Apart from other factors, it is therefore simply much less risky to manage a diversity of crops and livestock on a farm at a smaller scale.

When it comes to nutrient cycling and other activities on farm, different animals clearly offer different benefits. Chickens, for example, can help distribute the manure of other animals, while their faeces is particularly rich in nitrogen. Pigs can consume food waste that may otherwise go to a landfill (as demonstrated by one farmer in Quebec I visited who feeds his pigs waste whey from a nearby cheese factory), and they can thrive in forested areas on farm. Draught horses are helping a growing number of Canadian farmers to plough their fields and perform other tasks that result in less fossil-fuel consumption tied to tractor use. One ecological farmer I spoke with also expressed an interest in seeing research done on the potential to convert animal fat, as a waste product following slaughter, into biodiesel; just as another farmer discussed the need for the expansion of methane capture on farms with livestock for the purposes of energy generation.

From carbon sequestration to fertility, these are just some of the existing and potential ‘services’ provided by animals on ecological farms that may be overlooked in discussions of intensive livestock operations’ contributions to climate change. In recent years, authors such as Fairlie (2010), Niman (2014), and Schwartz (2013) have articulated reasons to move beyond simplified discussions of animal agriculture and the problem of greenhouse gas emissions (cf. Katz-Rosene and Martin
forthcoming). To be sure, the points I have raised here do not counter the arguments made by proponents of veganism for ethical reasons (see, e.g., Francione and Charlton 2013; Safran-Foer 2009), nor are they intended to. My goal has been to suggest that some discourses around ‘environmental veganism’ or ‘climate veganism’, such as those generated by *Cowspiracy*, do not take into account the potential for animals to contribute to an agroecologically oriented food system (cf. Chivers 2016). Thus, while from a climate change perspective the trend towards the meatification of diets should be reversed, and CAFOs should be eliminated, from an ecological standpoint it appears that livestock rearing should be changed drastically, but not eliminated from agriculture altogether.

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3.3 - Agroecology on the horizon

Having reviewed here the various possibilities for, and challenges associated with, a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions through ecological agriculture, in this section I take up the question of how agroecology specifically may be advanced as a strategy to tackle climate change in Canada. I do so by discussing, in turn, agroecology as a practice, a science and a movement, although there is clearly overlap between these dimensions of the concept and, as argued above, this kind of overlap can be productive.

*Agroecological Practice: ‘Beyond Organic’*

It is evident that common production practices among ecological farmers in this country, such as those that adhere to the Canadian Organic Standards, may be substantially more climate-friendly than those in industrial agriculture, but yet they are not perfect. Also, as mentioned in Chapter 1,
organic growing in Canada only accounts for 2.2 percent of agricultural production, with a total of 4,289 farms offering organic products (Statistics Canada 2016a). Many farmers I spoke with report that they are going ‘beyond’ the expectations associated with organic certification, indicating that they recognize the need to surpass the minimum standards. One farmer from southwestern Ontario offered this helpful framing as a way to relate organic practices to agroecology:

Agroecology is an international movement… [It] is a broader range of practices than organic, [although] under the same vision, under the same principles, but organic agriculture right now is very focused on the standards. And it’s a checklist… It’s not so much a place of learning. Whereas agroecology is a way of learning, a way of applying principles to your field that’s much more broad, much more open… The organic standards are a very important stepping stone along a much longer path. I think agroecology is the methodology of this pathway, [whereas] the organic standard is a milestone. I wouldn’t… fall in love with a milestone. I’d rather think about the path. (Interview, Dec. 2, 2016)

This points to the importance of expanding not just certified organic farming in Canada, but agroecology as a methodology that, from a climate change perspective, would lead to the gradual reduction of greenhouse gases in agriculture, while increasing farmers’ capacity to build soil carbon.

Yet most of my interviewees were much less familiar with the concept of agroecology than the farmer quoted here. Some had not heard of the term at all, whereas others had only heard about it in select contexts. As articulated by an eastern Ontario farmer who is quite active with the NFU and also familiar with agroecology:

I would say it’s still a fairly niche term. A lot of very good ideas are very complicated ideas. The ideas or concepts that have the most potential to solve some of our problems tend to be the ones that are not already popularized… And I think that’s the case for agroecology… It’s a very sophisticated and multi-faceted idea… so there’s a bit of a learning curve in promulgating it… So far I haven’t seen it reach the critical point where …it’s become a daily part of the vocabulary for most NFU people (and] also people that care about food and sustainable agriculture…) [But] I think that it has the potential to reach that point. (Interview, May 26, 2016)

41 This number includes 3,663 farms that are certified organic and 769 farms that are transitioning to organic, out of a total of 193,492 farms in Canada (Statistics Canada 2016a).
Due to the fact that agroecology is seen as being niche, complicated and—some would suggest—fairly academic sounding, it is a positive sign that both the NFU and Union Paysanne are taking steps to popularize the concept. For example, in the fall of 2015 the NFU released a brochure entitled *Agroecology in Canada: Food Sovereignty in Action*, which outlines the principles of agroecology, as well as relevant case studies (NFU 2015a). Also, as noted in Chapter 1, in 2013 Union Paysanne launched the Centre Paysan, which is the first agroecology school in Canada; 42 and, as a ‘school without walls,’ it regularly offers practical workshops that cover a wide range of production practices (see Union Paysanne, n.d.b).

This issue of practical training opportunities points to a key challenge with regard to the prospects of agroecology moving out from beyond the margins of Canadian agriculture. A review of the political economy of agricultural education in this country makes it clear that most formal and government-supported programs are geared toward conventional agriculture, while extension services have gradually been eroded from coast to coast (Laforge 2017; Milburn et al. 2010). Most ecological farmers I spoke with were unimpressed with the offerings from agricultural colleges, including those focused on ‘sustainable’ agriculture, just as they felt that contemporary extension programs were not oriented toward the kind of problem solving they were trying to accomplish. How, then, are farmers to learn about more climate-friendly practices that will help them avoid using synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and how might they improve their abilities to build soil organic matter and sequester carbon? In recent years, knowledge transfer about ecological production practices has largely been done through on-farm internships (which tend to be unpaid, raising a host of questions about the long-term viability of this approach; see Ekers et al. 2016; Ekers forthcoming) and through initiatives like the RJME listserv mentioned at the outset of this chapter. Non-profit or

42 La Vía Campesina recognizes the Centre Paysan as part of its network of agroecology schools, which adhere to a structured methodology for peasant-to-peasant learning. See www.centrepaysan.ca.
grassroots organizations are also playing an important role. Examples of these types of organizations in Ontario and Quebec include the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario (EFAO) and La Coopérative pour l’agriculture de proximité écologique (CAPÉ). The challenge for operations such as these is to function with minimal and precarious funding, which can include short-term grants from government agencies or foundations.

This is the difficult context in which the Centre Paysan is operating as it tries to advance agroecological training in Quebec. Horizontal, farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing is a central pillar of agroecological methodologies, but without the financial wherewithal to coordinate and promote these kinds of training opportunities, it does not seem likely that agroecological practices will be able to supplant those associated with industrial agriculture any time soon. Thus, not only will organic farming remain marginal under these circumstances, but so will those generally deemed to go ‘beyond organic’ on the path to agroecology.

As implied above, on-farm practices that will be most helpful in mitigating climate change are those that are incredibly knowledge-intensive as they involve managing a high diversity of species, while maintaining productivity by relying on the assets in the existing agroecosystem rather than through external inputs. As one farmer stated, “You can’t buy answers in a bag.” Another farmer, who runs an organic dairy operation, echoed this point:

A phrase that you hear is ‘knowledge-based farming.’ So, you need to [move beyond] whatever [is] sold to you by the seed and chemical company. (You know, “You have a problem? Whack it with a chemical”…) Instead, the ecological approach is [about trying] to understand the whole system and work with what’s there. (Interview, Jan. 27, 2016)

43 She was actually quoting Dick Thompson, who helped launch the Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI). Field notes, Jan. 28-31, 2016.
The enormity of the challenge associated with getting to this kind of knowledge-intensive agriculture cannot be underestimated. Not only are there limited opportunities for agroecological education in Canada, but so much farming knowledge has been lost as the number of farmers has steadily declined in recent decades in this country, and their technical skills have shifted toward conventional approaches.

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*Agroecological Science: From Carbon Accounting to a Just Transition*

Given the complexity of agroecological production practices, there is clearly a need for physical scientists to support farmers’ organizations that are attempting to advance agroecology in this country. To build on themes mentioned above, if farmers are to move forward with the ‘biological revolution’ in agriculture that will help fight climate change, then the kind of participatory action research promoted by Méndez and colleagues (2013, 2016) will be essential. Farmers need to know the most appropriate practices, given their geographical contexts, soil conditions and micro-climates that should be employed in managing biologically diverse agroecosystems. In many cases, farmers will already have this knowledge, and academic approaches will simply help with measuring, documenting and disseminating the information available. At other times, agroecologists may assist by sharing scientific knowledge about, for example, best known methods for specific plants to help fix nitrogen in the soil, or practical approaches to building soil carbon. Without this kind of support, farmers often have to rely on the limited time and resources they have to conduct on-farm experiments, and pay for soil tests out of pocket.
The links between climate change and agriculture also highlight the need for expanded *carbon accounting* methods in agroecosystems. Several farmers expressed to me in interviews that they would greatly benefit from more research that would help them understand the best ways for them to reduce greenhouse gas emissions associated with their on-farm activities. For example, one vegetable farmer in eastern Ontario wished that he had better data on carbon sequestration rates and approaches, given that he and his partner are “doing intensive market gardening [where] building soil carbon is one of [their] big challenges, because [they] do use the soil heavily, and that causes a lot of carbon cycling” (Interview, Nov. 26, 2016). A livestock farmer in Quebec expressed a clear interest in “harvesting more energy from the sun than [they are] using as stored energy, or fossil fuel… energy,” but said he needed more information on methane cycles on a farm like his (Interview, June 3, 2016). Another farmer from Quebec suggested that the most helpful approach may be for researchers to develop an online calculator of sorts, which he could use to understand the positive and negative aspects of the diverse activities he carries out, including those that contribute to greenhouse gas emissions such as driving a truck to market or making multiple passes in a tractor to avoid using pesticides (Interview, Nov. 27, 2015). This kind of carbon accounting tool, he felt, would both help him to target which practices to improve upon, but also communicate with his clientele about the net contribution he may be making in terms of combatting climate change.

These are important connections that can be made between agroecological science and on-farm practices. However, it must be noted that there is also great potential for *social scientists* to contribute to the advancement of agroecology in Canada. As scholars such as Henry Bernstein (2006) have argued, for example, a key agrarian question that needs to be addressed today concerns on-farm labour. When it comes to the capitalist food system in which farmers are embedded, there
are significant tensions that stem from structural pressures to maximize profits and efficiency. This can lead to farmers relying on fossil-fuel intensive technologies to reduce labour needs, and to the exploitation of those willing to perform agricultural labour in Canada, including migrant workers (Reid-Musson 2017; Weiler et al. 2016).

To illustrate the significant challenge confronting those wanting to contribute to a more climate-friendly agricultural model, I draw on calculations done by one farmer from eastern Ontario. This farmer, who grows a variety of grains, employs production practices that are not only organic but very much in-line with agroecology, as he uses no chemical inputs and provides all of his own fertility needs. However, he is keenly aware that he is relying on a tractor, which compelled him to estimate how much labour is saved by using diesel power rather than human sweat. He calculated that an average person would take 11 1/3 years to replace a barrel of oil (equivalent to 1700 kWh), and that a top athlete would take about 5 2/3 years. Financially this means that, if a worker is being paid $20 per hour, then a barrel of oil (that could cost $50 - $100 depending on the price of oil) will replace $200,000 worth of human labour. For his purposes, this farmer thus estimated that ploughing a 4-acre field, which takes him 5 hours using a tractor (and $16 in diesel), would require 2933 person-hours (or $58,660 in labour costs)—the equivalent of 10 people working for nearly 37 days (Interview, Feb. 8, 2017). 44

The implications of such calculations are stark. If agroecology is going to contribute to an agriculture that is not reliant on fossil fuels then the agrarian question of labour cannot be avoided. Social scientists, I am convinced, can contribute in important ways to determining how a shift from industrial agriculture to a more labour-intensive agroecological model may be possible. This, of

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44 For a complementary estimate, see FCW 2011. Even if these numbers are exaggerated, the point is well taken.
course, will involve addressing cultural, political-economic, and geographical questions, and it will not be a simple task. However, the framing I would suggest makes sense for considering such a proposition is that of a just transition. In climate change discourses, many labour groups and environmental advocates have pointed to the fact that a just transition is required in order to help workers currently employed in fossil fuel industries (from extraction to distribution) receive the supports—and perhaps training—they need to transition into the jobs that will be expanding in a less carbon-intensive economy (Newell and Mulvaney 2013). Although agriculture is normally not highlighted in these discussions, it certainly should be.

There are three key points to highlight in this regard:

1. Conventional farmers have become ensnared in an industrial mode of agricultural production (as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2), which typically compels them to rely on tractors, combines and other machinery that is required to operate at vast economies of scale. Those farmers will need to transition to a mode of farming that will have many more people working the land, or shift toward non-fossil-fuel-dependent technologies such as electric tractors. Such technologies are key means of production that should be controlled, perhaps cooperatively, by farmers, rather than having corporations extract surplus value by continually selling farmers machinery that tends to render them deeply indebted.

2. Farm workers across Canada, including both domestic and migrant labourers, are typically paid poorly and are often open to exploitation due to exceptions made within agricultural labour laws and the nature of existing immigration laws. In the next chapter, I argue that alliances between farmers and farm workers (as well as other labourers in the food system) can potentially contribute to a powerful bloc that would help drive struggles for food sovereignty. However, before this would be possible, tensions need to be resolved so that
farmers are not compelled to rely on exploitative labour relations, while farm workers need to enjoy safe working conditions, fair compensation, and the right to organize—all of which must be enshrined in appropriate laws.

3. In parallel with existing discussions of how a just transition would work for those labouring in fossil-fuel industries, significant training opportunities must be made available for those who would contribute to an agroecological transition in Canada. Most conventional farmers, current agricultural workers, and new entrants to this field, would all require substantial supports in order to acquire the skills needed to farm agroecologically. This, of course, relates to the above-mentioned politics of agricultural knowledge production in this country. It will not be sufficient (or just) for workers to learn agroecological practices by participating in unpaid internships and similar initiatives, nor are most agricultural training programs that are currently running equipped to train this generation of farmers and farm labourers.

In short, the role of social scientists in researching and articulating the ways in which Canadian agriculture could shift toward agroecology will thus require considerable attention to the incredible efficiencies offered by fossil fuels that would need to be left behind, and how, concretely, on-farm work could be restructured and expanded in a non-exploitative manner.

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*The Agroecological Movement: Political and Counterhegemonic Agroecology*

This issue of on-farm labour raises a host of political questions, as it is evident that agroecology is not only incompatible with the continuation of industrial agriculture but also with the capitalist food system in Canada. If ecological farmers, as petty commodity producers, are to increasingly eschew off-farm inputs and fossil-fuel driven machinery, then they will at least in part be moving away from
the cycles of competition inherent in capitalist economies, as well as the pressures for their farm operations to be profitable. This underlines how crucial it is that agroecological science and practices overlap with a counterhegemonic social movement. To paraphrase Haesook Kim, quoted above, food sovereignty must be on the agenda so that agroecology is not reduced to a technology.

As member organizations of La Vía Campesina, Union Paysanne and the NFU have begun to make efforts to advance a political agroecology in Canada—that is, one integrally linked to their struggles for food sovereignty. For example, the former is offering political education through the Centre Paysan and at various events, whereas the latter’s *Agroecology in Canada* brochure draws clear links between on-farm practices and power structures that must be transformed in order for agroecology to move forward. As stated by the NFU (2015a: 4) in the brochure, “Transnational energy and agribusiness corporations seek to maximize their own profits by selling inputs (inflows) and promoting production of monoculture crops (outflows), which are purchased at low prices from farmers to resell to consumers at high prices.” This statement accompanies an infographic, reproduced here (*Figure 3-3*), that contrasts production within the industrial food system and agroecological production. It is helpful because it clearly illustrates how the dominant system represents a carbon-intensive ‘through-flow process’ (Weis 2017) that serves corporate interests rather than rural communities and consumers.
If agroecology is to be counterhegemonic then, it must not only be associated with critiques of the capitalist food system, but a movement that harnesses the diverse interests of groups that will benefit from a transition to a system centred on agroecological production. The graphic above indicates that labour issues are part of the equation and, as noted, if the significant political challenges on this matter can be overcome, then there would be obvious benefits to workers who...
could contribute to an agriculture wherein exploitation is not the norm. There are, however, other important issues and challenges to consider in relation to agroecology as a movement. Although there is not space to discuss all of these in detail here, land access and marketing are two key areas that deserve highlighting, and both relate to efforts to establish a more climate-friendly agriculture.

In terms of land access, it is worth noting that one of the most significant barriers regularly referenced by farmers interested in getting into ecological agriculture is the cost of land (Laforge and Fenton 2015). As discussed elsewhere, individual private property landownership is a notable feature of capitalism (Gordon 1995; MacPherson 1978; Trauger 2014) (and settler colonialism, which is clearly a concomitant concern in Canada; Kepkiewicz and Dale 2018), and profit-seeking on land values is only exacerbated by speculation on farmland, which has been gradually increasing across the country (Desmarais et al. 2015; Sommerville and Magnan 2015). Part of the reason that conventional farmers are pressured to rely on carbon-intensive inputs such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides that degrade the soil is due to the fact that they are heavily indebted; they need to either pay off mortgages or rent land at exorbitant rates (Wiebe 2017). High land prices also mean that ecological farmers are pressured to (a) charge high prices for the food they produce, which makes food less affordable for local communities, thereby undermining the agroecological model, and/or (b) compromise on certain practices that would make their farms even better positioned to reduce greenhouse gases. The agroecological movement must therefore take the land issue into account, and, in terms of getting to agroecology’s ‘sweet spot,’ academics can clearly support by laying out scientific and political arguments for a transition to another model of land access and land relations.
On the topic of marketing, agroecology points to the need for not only a technical change in production practices, but also a new social model with regard to food distribution. As implied in Figure 3.3, such a model should entail a closer connection between farmers and non-farmers in communities, which raises questions that go beyond the ‘hows’ of ecological food production by highlighting the issue of where food goes when it leaves the farm gate. As one Ontario farmer who runs a collaborative CSA program indicated,

I see agroecology ...really as two main opportunities—One is to close our ecological loops and strengthen our ecological systems by using local microorganisms, minerals, [and] botanical extracts instead of these long-chain petrochemical derivatives which we know kill the soil-food web. That's one. And then the other is to close our economic loops, because any time we start closing our economic loops, farming locally, the money stays in the community. And the only way to create real wealth in a society is for the money in that society to be changing hands. And that's the basic function of local farms, and local businesses and local support networks... [T]he money changes hands and it changes hands and it just keeps generating wealth locally, instead of that money being extracted...

(Interview, Dec. 2, 2016)

The issue of corporate control and concentration in the retail sector is one that has been raised in food sovereignty discussions for good reason (Akram-Lodhi 2013; Winson 2017). Canadian farmers that are situated along the ‘path’ of agroecology are marginal in part because it is a significant challenge to scale out a system of distribution in a highly competitive food-marketing sector. To be sure, farmers I met with in Ontario, Quebec, and beyond are participating in innovative models to get the food they produce to local consumers. Examples include cooperative (or ‘multi-farm’) CSA programs, direct marketing to restaurants and smaller grocery stores, and enterprises and food hubs that focus on aggregating and distributing products from diverse farms. However, these models are generally much more demanding for consumers, who are used to the reliable availability of diverse products from mainstream food retailers. During a session on marketing at an agricultural conference that I attended in Kingston, Ontario, one CSA farmer summarized that, “The global industrial food system is inexpensive, convenient and efficient; the local system we’re part of is
expensive, inconvenient and inefficient.” He went on to suggest that farmers therefore need to provided added value, such as by offering consumers food that tastes better, or a relationship with a local farmer. Food aggregators certainly increase the efficiency and convenience with which food can be distributed, but these operations remain few in number.

On top of these challenges, the climate change issue adds important considerations that must be addressed in these discussions of food marketing in relation to agroecology and food sovereignty. While it would be easy to assume that closing ‘ecological and economic loops,’ and establishing more community-based economies, implies prioritizing the re-localization of food systems, the matter is not so straightforward. As suggested above, transportation can be far less significant an issue than production practices when it comes to food-related greenhouse gas emissions (MacRae et al. 2013; Vermeulen et al. 2012). Therefore, sourcing food that is produced at a distance may be more efficient from a carbon standpoint than local food. This is another dimension where carbon accounting could help determine the conditions under which food should be grown and marketed locally in Canada, and when it should be imported, by taking into account production methods, seasonality, and the distance and means by which food is being transported.

Many farmers I spoke with were clear that they do not believe agroecology and food sovereignty will bring about the end of food trade. Indeed, the farmer quoted above who spoke about closing economic loops raised a salient point about short-chain circuits:

[Our] model is very much a ground-up model that [features] short-chain economic development, linking production directly to the consumers. [W]e are now stepping up to do that at a level which is looking at cooperative transnational produce purchasing… and I've already done [this] successfully a couple of times. A couple of years ago, we organized 85

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45 Field notes, Nov. 30, 2016. Quotation is slightly paraphrased. It must be noted as well, as stated in Chapter 1, that the industrial food system is only efficient in some ways; from an energy conversion perspective, it is certainly less efficient than agroecological systems.
mango farmers, for example, in Mexico, and we got 65 truckloads of mangos [into local retail stores] and [those farmers] got 11 pesos per kilo, when everyone else was getting 2.5 pesos. So the opportunities [for] …creating these short chains are fantastic for the producer and for the consumer. (Interview, Dec. 2, 2016)

This perspective offers a broader understanding of community-based economies, and it must be noted that if those mangos were grown agroecologically and primarily transported by rail or boat, then they would likely be a much less carbon-intensive product than even some organic greenhouse-grown tomatoes shipped within Canada via truck (MacRae et al. 2013; Pirog et al. 2001). The quote also draws attention to the fact that the actors who could potentially benefit from (and contribute to) a counterhegemonic shift to a more agroecological food system includes producers and other groups not situated within this country’s borders. Of course, this is to say nothing about the considerable question of Canada’s export-oriented agricultural system and the disproportionate amount of farmland that exists (e.g. on the Prairies) in comparison to the number of local consumers. Although this country may always be an exporter of grains and oilseed products, as a climate change solution, agroecology would demand that we halt the industrial methods used to grow such crops, while shifting at least a portion of that production to supporting more localized food systems.

There are evidently significant political challenges associated with attempting to re-order the existing ‘value chains’ in food production, which would include facing powerful food retailers, commodity associations and petrochemical companies, but the perspectives raised here point to the important discussions that need to be had about food marketing in relation to the establishment of a more climate-friendly agricultural system. Together with land issues, these are key examples of political problems that must be resolved in order for an agroecological system to be advanced in Canada, which points to the need for a counterhegemonic movement that will complement and overlap with
the science and practice of agroecology. While some frameworks used for articulating ecological food production, such as permaculture and organics, may arguably be compatible with a political movement, it is clear that they are typically *not* taken up in this way (see Guthman 2004; Massicotte and Kelly-Bisson 2018). It is for this reason that insisting on the value of agroecology is not just a semantic argument. As La Vía Campesina has demonstrated, the concept is an instrumental cognitive resource, and in addition to overlapping significantly with food sovereignty, the merging of agroecological science, movement and practice holds considerable potential for the shift away from industrial agriculture to become a reality.

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3.4 - Conclusion

From a climate change mitigation perspective, it is clear to me that I was right to be impressed with the production practices employed on Rachelle and Antoine’s farm, mentioned at the outset of this chapter. They not only avoid using chemical inputs, but they also produce much of their own fertility needs by using manure from their own animals and biodynamic preparations. In addition, although I was not there to measure their percentages of soil organic matter and subsequent carbon sequestration potential, they are undoubtedly doing much more to reduce greenhouse gases than a typical conventional farm.

From an agroecological perspective, however, it makes sense that they would raise questions about how they could improve their practices, such as by relying on their tractor less, or configuring a different distribution model that does not involve driving a diesel-fuelled truck to markets and CSA drop-off locations. I thus discussed in this chapter the prospect of agroecological practices being
expanded in this country, and raised the fact that a lack of opportunities for training or knowledge-transfer is a primary challenge that must be overcome in this regard. I also argued that scientists have a role to play in advancing agroecology. This includes by working with farmers to measure and disseminate best practices for ecological growing that is both productive and beneficial for soil health, while also helping them to understand the carbon accounting of their on-farm activities.
Social scientists can also help create a road map to a just transition in Canadian agriculture, given the significant labour issues that would need to be resolved in a more climate-friendly system.

These issues overlap with the need for a social movement that will advance agroecology, as there are other notable political issues such as land access and marketing that will need to be addressed by proponents of a more socio-ecologically sensible food production system. It is the overlapping of practical, scientific and political aspects of agroecology that make it so much more of a robust concept, albeit a complex one, than others used to describe agricultural production regimes. As discussed above, Rachelle and Antoine are not alone among ecological farmers in their lack of awareness of agroecology as a term. There is therefore substantial work to be done to increase this awareness, and La Vía Campesina member organizations like the NFU and Union Paysanne will certainly need support in doing this, while also taking on the associated political challenges. This recalls Snipstal’s (2015) assertion that alliance building will be key to moving agroecology forward. I have demonstrated here that climate change is a principal signifier as to why alliances for agroecology are needed in Canada and beyond. How these alliances may be formed is a question I take up in the next chapter.
Chapter 4

**Politicizing agriculture: Food sovereignty through institutionalization and movement building**

4.1 - Food sovereignty and system change?

*Progressive* policies and aspirations

There are over 150 people in the room—almost all farmers—and some of those around me are smiling, evidently relieved, as the vast majority of delegates raise their voting cards to indicate that they are in favour of the policy resolution that has just been debated. It is November 2016 and I am at the National Farmers Union (NFU) convention in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. The air in the large ballroom we are in can sometimes be filled with tension, as participants passionately discuss the merits of policy proposals that make it onto the agenda; however, despite some contestation that has just ensued, it is clear that the NFU will now officially endorse the concept of a Basic Income Guarantee for all Canadians. The concept is an important one because, if implemented effectively,\(^{46}\) a Basic Income Guarantee could help alleviate poverty across the country and reduce food insecurity among the 4 million Canadians who cannot afford safe, adequate and healthy food (Dachner and Tarasuk 2017). As the ‘whereas’ clauses to this resolution also mention, however, the implementation of such a policy could also improve the livelihoods of farmers who “are pushed for economic reasons to [take up] environmentally undesirable practices.”\(^{47}\) Having this policy

\(^{46}\) See Clarke (2018) for a discussion of the need for a universal basic income (UBI), and the risk of means-tested or conditional basic income programs facilitating increased exploitation and expanded precarious low-wage employment.

\(^{47}\) Field notes, Nov. 25, 2016.
resolution adopted by convention delegates means that the NFU may henceforth advocate for a Basic Income Guarantee while lobbying politicians and undertaking other activities and campaigns.

At this and other conventions I attended that were put on by both the NFU and Union Paysanne, I was often struck by moments such as this where it seemed clear that farmers in attendance were convinced that (a) government policies can be important tools for creating social change, and (b) these policies often extend far beyond narrow understandings of farmers’ interests and the boundaries of the food system. As discussed in Chapter 3, the social-movement dimension of agroecology is essential, as food sovereignty—in conjunction with a range of other struggles—will need to be advanced in the fight against climate change in Canada. Indeed, an analysis of the links between food and climate draws immediate attention to the wide range of policy-related challenges that need to be addressed, from land access and labour issues to approaches to trade and transportation. For the NFU and Union Paysanne, addressing such challenges will need to be done in collaboration with other groups, acknowledging the different ways that diverse populations such as women, people of colour, and Indigenous peoples are negatively affected by a food system not only embedded in capitalism, but also in patriarchy, structural racism, and settler colonialism (see Allen and Sachs 2007; Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011; Morrison 2011).

Given the possibility for the limited demands of specific actors and groups to be co-opted in such a context, it is therefore essential that ‘progressive’ policy work that would lead to a more just and ecological food system is combined with broader efforts to transform society itself (see Desmarais 2017; Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). In this chapter, I discuss both the work that Union Paysanne has been undertaking in Quebec, and that of the NFU elsewhere in Canada, as a means to

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48 Here I am recalling Holt-Giménez and Shattuck’s (2011) discussion of the progressive and radical strands of the food movement (summarized in Chapter 2).
compare and contrast the different natures of their struggles for food sovereignty. I outline how various political, cultural and geographical factors can constrain these struggles in their respective contexts, and I argue that alliance building with a range of social groups will be key to advancing food sovereignty in Canada. I rely on Gramsci’s (1971, 1992) conception of the ‘historic bloc’ to assert that connections with allied groups will be key to preventing the co-optation of food sovereignty and the undermining of the movement’s more radical demands and vision. I also suggest that institutionalization will likely lead to reformism if policy efforts and related activities are not dialectically linked to ongoing struggles to establish a widespread counterhegemonic movement in this country.

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Overcoming ‘capitalocentrism’

Questions pertaining to the institutionalization of food sovereignty are important, and have been raised by numerous scholars in recent years (see, e.g., Desmarais, Claeys and Trauger 2017). On the one hand, while it is important that ‘alternative food initiatives’ not be constrained to niche markets that are only accessible to privileged social groups (Goodman et al. 2012; Guthman 2008a, 2008b), food sovereignty advocacy has sometimes been critiqued for being overly ‘capitalocentric’—centring on an oppositional stance to capitalism, and on resistance to reformism within capitalist economies, without proposing viable alternatives to the status quo (McInnes and Mount 2017). On the other hand though, based on contemporary case studies of practical, policy-related efforts that do exist to institutionalize food sovereignty, it is not clear “how to simultaneously reflect and engage in the

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49 Following these scholars, I discuss institutionalization in terms of engagement with the state or, in broader, Gramscian terms, the ‘integral state.’ This is not to deny that families, households and communities are institutions in their own right, but rather to simplify the analysis.
radical change that is at the heart of [this concept] while creating the institutional spaces for
deliberation and action to meet food sovereignty objectives in any given place” (Trauger, Claeys and
Desmarais 2017: 1-2). Although countries as varied as Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, Nicaragua,
Nepal, Mali and Senegal have advanced laws, policies and programs to support food sovereignty, in
practice these efforts have led to mixed results, with reality often not reflecting the ambitions
expressed on paper (Desmarais, Claeys and Trauger 2017).

Bernstein (2014: 1054) points out that the state is the ever-present “elephant in the room” when it
comes to the “programmatic aspirations of [food sovereignty],” and he expresses some scepticism
that governments will be likely to implement the far-reaching demands of food sovereignty
proponents in the context of “the ongoing march of capitalism (and once state socialism) ‘against
the peasant’.” A Gramscian view of this conundrum is helpful in that it positions the state (or
‘political society’) in relation to society at large (‘civil society’) via the integral state. These concepts
illustrate that while institutionalization through policy efforts may be important, in order for
counterhegemonic change to take place such institutionalization must be accompanied by a broader
social (i.e. cultural and political) transformation (Gramsci 1971, 1992). As discussed in Chapter 2, in
The Southern Question Gramsci (2015) drew attention to the need for alliances between peasants and
urban workers as a means to establish a social force (or ‘bloc’) with the potential to shift the balance
of power in society and truly influence state proceedings. The context in Canada today may well be
very different from that of Italy of the 1920s and 1930s, but the common question remains as to
how farmers and other groups will be able to overcome ‘militant particularism’ (activism based on a
narrow set of interests and limited geographical perspective) (Harvey 1996), and establish long-term
alliances that will contribute to a new historic bloc. This is in effect a reformulation of the agrarian
question, asking not only how farmers will align themselves in relation to corporations and others
benefitting from the ongoing entrenchment of the capitalist food system, but also *which social groups will align with farmers*—particularly those struggling for food sovereignty. As I will discuss below, Union Paysanne and the NFU will evidently need to appreciate how their desires for the implementation of particular policies that would support food sovereignty must be congruent with general struggles that will allow Canada’s ‘subaltern’ to overcome the various oppressive forces they are facing.

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4.2 - Institutionalization

In this section, I provide an overview of the context in which food sovereignty struggles are taking place in Quebec, in Ontario and in the rest of Canada, before discussing specific policy struggles in which Union Paysanne and the NFU have been engaging in recent years.

*The context in Quebec*

Perhaps the most striking thing about the context for food sovereignty struggles in Quebec is that the notion of *sovereignty* itself resonates in a very particular way in the province. While it is not possible here to adequately summarize the historic tensions between the mainly French-speaking Quebec and the rest of Canada, it is important to mention that these tensions were intense at various points during the 20th century, at times leading to violence. The province has never formally agreed to the 1982 patriation of the federal constitution, and it has twice held referenda (which failed, in 1980 and 1995) on the proposal that Quebec establish a more sovereign relation with Canada (that is to say it would be independent but continuing to share some ties such as a common
currency). There remains a sovereigntist movement in Quebec and these debates continue to arise in both provincial and national elections. In broad strokes, political sovereignty for many Québécois would represent a way to protect their language and culture, the independence to make economic and legal decisions without negotiating with Canada, and a source of pride for a population that has arguably been marginalized within the federalist system.

Interestingly, the theme of sovereignty has long been intertwined with agricultural development in Quebec, both explicitly and implicitly. The place of rural society was historically central in the social imaginary of this French-Canadian colonial region, in large part due to the significant economic contributions farming made. Throughout the 19th century the powerful Catholic Church was very much supportive of agricultural producers, approving of their role in contributing to Quebec’s self-sufficiency—both at the domestic level and more broadly (Dupont 2009). As Quebec transitioned to a more secular society during the 20th century, the state continued in this spirit, seeing the agricultural sector as key to economic development and the ‘national’ interest. This was particularly true as agriculture was taken up as part of sovereigntist struggles throughout the latter half of the century: “An economic force, [farmers…] remained the shield, the bulwark of values associated with solidarity, family, and the French-Canadian nation,” notes Morisset (2010: 15). As a result, the agricultural sector retained significant political leverage and active financial support.

One of the key signifiers of the close connection between the Quebec state and the agricultural sector is the privileged position afforded to the Union des producteurs agricoles (UPA, the ‘Agricultural Producers Union’). Since it was formally established in 1972, UPA has been the sole voice formally representing farmers in the province. Through legislative decree, Quebec farmers are in fact

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50 Quotes from French texts translated by author.
mandated to pay membership fees to UPA in order to access government supports, including the reimbursement of agricultural property taxes, and to legally market their products. Groups such as Union Paysanne (2010) refer to this as the ‘syndicate monopoly.’ In practice, this monopoly position has secured for UPA a reliable line of communication with the Minister of Agriculture, and often with the Premier of Quebec as well. In recent decades, despite the fact that there is diversity within UPA’s ranks, its more larger, conventional farmers have wielded more power, supporting the Quebec government’s preference for an agriculture sector focused on strategic exportation and “la conquête des marchés” (the conquest of markets) (Morisset 2010).

As a consequence of these trends, UPA’s state-supported position has contributed to a “producer-driven” food system in Quebec (Ashraf and Konforti 2010), however it is a system in which state policies seem to disproportionately favour certain producers (i.e. large, corporate, vertically integrated operations) and certain practices (i.e. export-oriented, monocultural production). As an example of political bias towards industrial agriculture, Quebec’s subsidies and insurance programs are based on volume of production, meaning that large-scale operations (such as large cereal, corn and pork producers) reap the most benefits. According to one calculation, a mere 12 percent of farms (those with a gross revenue over $250,000) are capturing 46 percent of income security supports, whereas another 33 percent of farms (with revenues between $10,000 and $50,000) only receive 7 percent of these benefits, and those with even smaller revenues receive nothing (Laplante 2002: 203). There are apparently 4,000 of these latter farms in Quebec, with revenues below $10,000, and UPA deems these to be “too small” to be competitive in the ‘modern’ agricultural sector (Bouchard 2002: 88).

In discussing UPA’s close ties with the Quebec government, sociologist Marco Silvestro (2008: 112), summarizes the situation as follows:
Over the course of 35 years this agrarian regime has become almost totalitarian, controlling every aspect of agricultural life and systematically excluding voices that are dissident or outside of the regime. UPA’s elites have promoted chemical and productivist agriculture, provoking discontent among those who have another vision for agriculture…

Union Paysanne members are notable among those whose voices UPA has apparently been trying to suppress. In the opinion of one Union Paysanne farmer with whom I spoke, the dominant position afforded to UPA is the single biggest problem that is inhibiting the realization of food sovereignty in the province:

In Quebec, we have the last syndicate monopoly in the world in agriculture. We need pluralism [in union representation…] so that we’re able to have our voices heard by the government, so that the government will recognize us as peasants… That’s the first thing that needs to change in my opinion. (Interview, July 21, 2015)

However, it is important to note that the unparalleled access that UPA has to Quebec’s Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPAQ), and the preference the syndicate seems to have for the larger, conventional producers within its ranks, is not only a challenge in terms of representation. As explained by a young farmer who is active within Union Paysanne:

The problem in Quebec is not only the monopoly… It’s that UPA has a grip on everything. Here, we don’t have real sales agencies; the sales agencies are linked through the plant conjoints ['joint plans'] to the marketing boards, which are overseen by UPA… All of the Ministry of Agriculture’s programs fundamentally go through UPA… UPA controls everything! So, do you see the difference? As of right now, we [in Union Paysanne] are completely marginalized. (Interview, Aug. 24, 2015)

In sum, UPA has enormous influence within MAPAQ and its various agencies, and this has had palpable impacts on the functioning of Quebec’s food system, and in terms of limiting the capacity of farmers to organize around an alternative vision for agriculture.
The context in Ontario and the rest of Canada

A comparison between Quebec’s agricultural regime and that of Ontario and the rest of Canada is interesting both in terms of the differences and similarities between the respective contexts for struggles to institutionalize food sovereignty. To begin with, the word ‘sovereignty’ certainly does not resonate in the same way outside of Quebec. With the relatively sparse population that is especially noticeable on the Prairies, Canadian agriculture has long been tied to export markets. This is connected with the first (‘colonial-diasporic’) food regime mentioned in Chapter 1, which had farmers outside of Quebec particularly involved in sending wheat and other grains to Britain during the height of the latter’s hegemonic imperialism in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century (Friedmann 2005; McMichael 2009). With Canada exporting approximately 58 percent (by value) of its agricultural products (AAFC 2016), the federal government has long noted the sector’s importance in terms of overall economic activities, however there are not the same links made between the culture of family farming and nationalist pride as there are in Quebec. In many ways, Canadian agriculture has been especially implicated in a historical compromising of sovereignty—namely, that of Indigenous peoples. As various authors have observed, settler colonial farming was central to the motivations and strategies for the national government to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their land, and the Indian Act was used to ensure that the activities of Indigenous communities—including farming—did not interfere with the success of settler agricultural pursuits (Carter 1990; Daschuk 2013; Kepiewicz 2017; Vowel 2012). These developments also took place in Quebec, but were particularly evident in western Canada.

Another notable difference is that the ‘syndicate monopoly’ dynamic is unique to Quebec. In the rest of Canada, farmers can choose to register their farm businesses with different provincial

51 “It is estimated that approximately 58% of the value of primary agriculture production in Canada is exported, either as primary commodities or as processed food and beverage products” (AAFC 2016).
organizations. While the NFU is a voluntary organization in most provinces, it is in fact an ‘accredited’ farm organization in Ontario, as well as in New Brunswick and on Prince Edward Island. Ontarian farmers therefore, for example, are able to select the NFU-Ontario to represent them when they complete their annual Farm Business Registration (FBR), which is required for any agricultural producer earning over $7,000 gross per year and wishing to benefit from government programs such as a 75-percent property tax rebate offered only to farmers. Apart from the NFU-Ontario, farmers in the province can also choose to register with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA), the largest and most established farm organization, or the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario (CFFO).

Being an accredited farm organization in Ontario, which it has been since 2002, is particularly important for the NFU given that this is the province with the most farmers (at approximately 49,600 farm operators) (Statistics Canada 2017d), and that the accreditation provides the organization with more recognition and therefore a greater revenue stream through the FBR program. This is important for the NFU nationally, with its regional organizations active from British Columbia to the Maritimes, given that it prides itself on being the only independent farm organization of its kind in Canada. This means that only farmers (and farm families) can join, but not industry associations and commodity groups. One dairy farmer with whom I spoke highlighted this as a source of pride, and she emphasized that “being an independent organization—not being beholden to corporations and large agribusiness organizations” was one of the key motivations for her long-time activism with the NFU (Interview, Jan. 27, 2016). This was echoed by many other NFU members who I met throughout my research. Thus, being an accredited farm organization allows the NFU in Ontario to rest on a more solid foundation in terms of resources, whereas in most of the country it must rely on volunteer memberships—a feat that has only become more
difficult in recent decades due to farm consolidation and the steady decline of Canadians involved agriculture as a profession (Statistics Canada 2017c).

While the absence of a ‘syndicate monopoly’ outside of Quebec has not guaranteed the NFU a great deal of influence when it comes to agricultural policy-making, there is at least a plurality of voices representing farmers in Ontario and elsewhere in Canada. One livestock farmer who has held different positions on the NFU-Ontario’s board expressed that she has noticed a change since the organization has become accredited in the province, noting that “at one point [the provincial government] just thought we were like, ‘ah, the NFU,’ but I think [that now…] we are appreciated to be an alternative voice [among] the farm organizations” (Interview, Oct. 30, 2015). She went on to point out that expressing the NFU’s position on a particular matter, or being invited to various meetings, does not necessarily lead to concrete results; however there is at least an institutional inroad that demonstrates the potential for the organization to influence policy. A vegetable farmer from New Brunswick echoed this tension when she said simply, “[We] do get a say… but we’re still kind of the fringe, the little guys,” noting that the government sees them as a sort of “commodity group” representing small-scale farmers that must compete to be heard among the other commodity groups representing apple growers, blueberry producers, dairy farmers, and so on (Interview Dec. 17, 2015).

In sum, while the NFU remains marginal in Canada, like Union Paysanne is in Quebec, it at least has the opportunity to formally represent farmers. The syndicate monopoly held by UPA does not allow for this, and the fact that a single producers’ union oversees various aspects of agricultural marketing and administration within the province further limits the chance for the productivist regime to be challenged. While one could imagine a syndicate monopoly in which the state favoured
agroecological farming and genuine food sovereignty, this is certainly not the case in Quebec, and there is little room for progress to take place democratically.

Of course, there are also policy struggles that must take place at the federal level. As discussed in Chapter 1, agricultural policies nationally tend to favour larger producers, with Canada’s farm policy landscape featuring indirect subsidies that specifically advantage certain groups. As noted by former NFU president Nettie Wiebe (2017: 146), “large farms are getting billions of dollars in tax-funded farm-program payments in order to remain solvent […] with] approximately 64 per cent of program payments […] going] to the 27 per cent of Canadian farms with gross revenues over $250,000 per year.”

This disproportionate capture of government funds is due to the fact that programs are based on volume of production. Examples of programs that favour larger and export-oriented agricultural businesses include AgriInvest (a risk mitigation program), AgriStability (an income support program), and AgriInsurance (a program aimed at minimizing losses due to natural hazards). Numerous NFU members I spoke with expressed their dismay about the fact that the federal government sees agriculture as an industry, never questioning the existing policy emphasis. One young farmer put it simply when she said:

The focus is on exports and GDP, and …there’s no focus on feeding people anywhere in [agriculture] policy—It’s not even talked about, [or] considered… It’s like, “We need to build the industry and grow our exports and grow the export dollars,” but that doesn’t mean dollars going back into farmers’ pockets… or food going into eaters’ mouths. [It’s as if] that stuff is not even relevant. (Interview, May 28, 2016)

Evidently some funds, by way of government programs, are going into farmers’ pockets, however even the largest of conventional farmers that are disproportionately benefitting from these arrangements are likely to be struggling. This is due to the fact that most farm revenues are captured
by corporations upstream from the farm (i.e. those selling farmers inputs at high costs), while companies downstream (i.e. processors and retailers) have been buying farm products at prices that are stagnant or decreasing. This phenomenon leads to the ‘cost-price squeeze,’ mentioned in Chapter 2; a phenomenon that is seeing farmers retain less than 1.5 percent of gross farm revenues (Wiebe 2017). To make matters worse, as a result of high prices for inputs, machinery and land, Canadian farmers are on average carrying more than $23 in debt for each dollar of net income that they bring in (ibid.: 146-7; cf. Qualman 2011). Thus, the agricultural policy landscape in Canada makes viability difficult whether one is a petty commodity producer or the owner of a farm enterprise more fully integrated into capitalist relations of production (i.e. as part of the ‘rural bourgeoisie’).

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Public policy struggles

Given the specific challenges that exist in Quebec regarding UPA’s syndicate monopoly, and the general challenges faced throughout Canada in terms of government programs that favour larger-scale, export-oriented industrial agriculture, there are evidently significant obstacles to overcome in terms of institutionalizing food sovereignty in this country. Here I will discuss some specific policy struggles that Union Paysanne and the NFU have taken up, with a focus on those related to the advancement of a more climate-friendly, agroecological production regime. I have broken the discussion down into the areas of marketing, land access and climate change mitigation.

MARKETING: One key area where both Union Paysanne and the NFU have focused their policy-related efforts concerns orderly marketing systems, and Canada’s supply management system in
particular. Supply management, which has been in place across the country since the early 1970s but is administered differently in each province, aims to stabilize prices (especially in terms of protecting farm revenues) by balancing the supply of agricultural commodities and market demands. It does this by assigning limited quotas for the production of dairy, eggs, chickens, and turkeys. Farmers in supply-managed sectors can therefore rely on having their costs of production covered, as government agencies set prices according to those costs for each commodity area, just as they can rely on import controls to prevent the market being flooded with products from other countries.

In November 2014, Union Paysanne released a discussion paper, ‘Toward Supply Management 2.0 in Canada’ (Union Paysanne 2014), and just over a year later the NFU (2016a) contributed ‘Strengthening Supply Management’ to the conversation. Although the two organizations arrived at proposals that varied in some respects, both were clearly calling for substantial reforms to the system. Unlike some right-wing think tanks and economists who are in favour of abolishing supply management, Union Paysanne and the NFU argue that it needs to be protected—especially in light of the threats the system has faced during free trade negotiations—but that there is substantial room for improvement if it is going to truly contribute to food sovereignty.

One of the key problems the two organizations point to is that the capitalization of quota and speculation have gradually led to the “cartelization” of supply management (Union Paysanne 2014), which has meant that cost increases associated with purchasing quota in recent decades have made it virtually impossible for new farmers to enter into supply-managed sectors. For example, as estimated by Union Paysanne (2014: 14), a young farmer in Quebec would need to invest $250,000 in quota to
secure the right to milk ten cows (the minimal point-of-entry in the dairy sector), and this investment is on top of purchasing the cows, buildings, and necessary equipment. On this point the NFU notes that, in supply-managed sectors in general, “new entrants have start-up costs on top of paying for quota, making it impossible to successfully bid against established producers who have access to more credit on better terms” (NFU 2016a: 6). Reforms proposed by Union Paysanne therefore include the introduction of a cap on the price of quota in areas where such a cap does not already exist, and a limit to the number of quota units a single producer can hold (Union Paysanne 2014: 26). The NFU (2016a) agreed with the need to implement such a limit, while also arguing that quota ultimately be decapitalized, so that provinces’ marketing agencies would allocate quota rather than it being bought and sold. Similarly, the organization proposed that new quota coming on board (e.g. due to farmers retiring and growing markets) be reserved for “new entrants and alternative production systems” as a means to encourage more diverse and ecological production (NFU 2016a: 13).

Both Union Paysanne and the NFU also have different proposals that would heighten the non-quota limits in supply-managed sectors (i.e. raising the exemption thresholds on the number of chickens, laying hens, or turkeys that a farmer may raise without holding quota). Union Paysanne (2014) argues that raising non-quota limits could lead to the start-up of hundreds of new farms in each province, encourage diversified and ecologically sustainable production methods, and thus

52 Quota is required in the dairy sector generally, whether the end product is destined to be milk, cheese, butter or other such products.
53 For a further discussion of the work of Union Paysanne and the National Farmers Union on supply management reforms, see Desmarais and Wittman (2014).
54 There is currently no exemption threshold for dairy cows, as milk cannot be marketed at all outside of supply management, but Union Paysanne (2014: 28) proposes that a non-quota arrangement be introduced in the dairy sector.
55 Union Paysanne (2014) specifically recommends that quota exemption levels be raised and standardized across the country, whereas the NFU (2016a: 9) argues that “off-quota exemptions should be reviewed and revised ... in the context of ... quota allocation policies that seek to maintain and increase the farmer numbers and diversity of production systems.”
reinvigorate rural economies and make way for the next generation of farmers, countering the trend toward the continued loss of agricultural producers in the province.

Also on the topic of marketing, although not necessarily limited to supply-managed sectors, these organizations have also advocated for measures to: facilitate the sale of agricultural products on-farm and through short commodity circuits; ensure regulations support the viability of small-scale abattoirs; assess opportunities for the selling of unpasteurized (raw) milk; and remove barriers for farmers wishing to either process and market their own products, or directly sell small animals slaughtered on-farm (NFU 2011, 2016a; Union Paysanne 2013). In general, the proposals outlined here, if adopted, could have profound impacts on the marketing of food in Canada, and yet they are far from unthinkable: the NFU’s discussion paper points to examples from across the country where exceptions and experiments are being attempted, and these are doing a small part to reverse or slow financial concentration and industrialization in these sectors (NFU 2016a; cf. Mount 2016).

LAND ACCESS: There are also clear policy initiatives related to land access that could help make way for new and ecological farmers. Union Paysanne, for example, has advocated that Quebec’s land-related policies be changed to support ‘peasant’ agriculture. It has argued that the Loi sur la Protection du Territoire et des Activités Agricoles (the ‘Law on the Protection of Land and Agricultural Activities’) should be changed to allow for the subdivision of agricultural lots in order to promote diversified production practices rather than favouring the consolidation of farms (Union Paysanne 2013). A related proposal is to make the law more responsive to the needs of different regions and communities across the province—suggesting a devolution of governance—and to have it incorporate criteria that prioritize multifunctionality and organic/niche production. Union Paysanne
also argues that the law should allow municipalities to levy a tax penalty on agricultural lands when the owner does not live on the property and the land has not been cultivated for three years (ibid.).

The NFU, for its part, has for some time bemoaned the fact that corporate consolidation of Canadian farmland—and speculative land investments in general—is driving up land prices, which both increases farmers’ debt loads (often driving them out of business) and prevents new farmers from entering the sector (NFU 2015b; cf. Desmarais et al. 2015; Sommerville and Magnan 2015). The NFU acknowledges that some provinces, including Quebec, British Columbia and Prince Edward Island, have stronger legislation to protect farmland than others, but nevertheless has several recommendations for federal and provincial governments to reverse the trend of land consolidation and its concomitant industrialization of agriculture. Among these recommendations are proposals for governments to:

1. restrict farmland ownership to individuals (and operations or co-operatives owned by individuals) that reside in the province in question;
2. legislate the maximum size of land parcels that can be held;
3. set up mechanisms to support intergenerational land transfers that avoid hefty loans (such as through land trusts, land banks, and community-based and other financing options);
4. direct Farm Credit Canada to better support small-scale farms; and
5. restrict or prohibit the transfer of farmland for non-agricultural uses (NFU 2015b: 31-32).

Importantly, in terms of a transition to a more agroecological production regime in Canada, the NFU also argues that:

Governments should provide incentives and support for land stewardship practices that maintain the land’s productivity for the long term …and corresponding penalties for using farming practices designed to extract maximum rents in the short term at the expense of soil health, biodiversity, water quality and other environmental benefits. (NFU 2015b: 31)
As land access is perhaps the most common challenge cited by new and aspiring farmers seeking to enter into ecological agriculture (NNFC forthcoming), these policy measures proposed by Union Paysanne and the NFU could contribute significantly to a more climate-friendly and food sovereignty-oriented production system.

CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATION: Although direct proposals concerning climate change mitigation have been taken up to a lesser extent by the NFU and Union Paysanne than the policies discussed above, in recent years the organizations have been paying increasing attention to these matters. The NFU, notably, has specific policy resolutions outlining their position on climate change that have been passed at national conventions. As a general statement, the NFU “demands that all levels of government acknowledge the need to massively and urgently reduce greenhouse gas emissions” (Holtslander 2016: 3). More specifically, the organization’s policy statements express a scepticism about the possibility for international carbon trading to effectively reduce greenhouse gas emissions, therefore the NFU argues against the commodification of carbon credits, further asserting “that individual countries must be responsible for greenhouse gas reduction within their own borders” (ibid.).

The organization acknowledges though that carbon can be sequestered in well-managed soils, and therefore “urges the federal and provincial governments to pay livestock family farmers for increasing and/or maintaining carbon in pastures, hay land and forest land…” (ibid.). Related to this, anticipating the need for a carbon tax to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, in 2016 the NFU passed a policy resolution that supported advocacy for “all levels of government to create comprehensive agriculture rebate programs based on measurable on-farm carbon emission reductions and increased carbon sequestration” (NFU 2016b: 18). Such a rebate (or ‘tax-and-
refund’) program would allow farmers to bear (1) the increased costs that would inevitably be downloaded onto them by corporations selling agricultural inputs (such as fertilizers), and (2) the decreased farm-gate prices that would result from transportation companies, processors and others that would be seeking to off-load costs associated with a carbon tax (Holtslander 2016; NFU 2016b; Qualman 2017b). At the same time, a program such as this would incentivize farmers to shift toward (or maintain) more climate-friendly agricultural practices, from reducing the use of synthetic fertilizers to conserving energy on-farm (ibid.).

While these are perspectives being adopted by the NFU at the national level, select regional bodies within the organization are undertaking climate change advocacy work at the provincial level. To focus on the situation in Ontario, in 2015 the Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change released a discussion paper on climate change, calling for broad public input and participation given that the Ministry was developing a strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Ontario 2015). The NFU-Ontario responded to this call with a submission that noted the potential for emission reductions and carbon sequestration in agriculture, while also “proposing a combination of a carbon tax and a carbon fee and dividend revenue structure” (NFU-Ontario 2015: 2). This proposal, which complements the tax-and-refund approach just described, was accompanied by a warning that carbon offsetting schemes could lead to land grabbing, as corporations could buy up farmland in order to benefit from the sequestration of carbon in soils (i.e. by either using this as a credit in order to continue polluting, or capitalizing on payments made for such ‘ecosystem services’) (NFU-Ontario 2015).

In contrast, the Ontario Federation of Agriculture’s (OFA’s) response to the Ministry was very much in favour of a cap-and-trade system that included offsets for specific agricultural practices,
with an apparent focus on techno-managerial approaches to reducing emissions (OFA 2015). In the end, it was clear that if either organization influenced the provincial government on these matters it was the OFA. Two months after the release of the discussion paper on climate change, in April 2015, the Premier announced that Ontario would be entering into a cap-and-trade system, signing a deal with Quebec, which had instituted such an approach in 2013. In addition, on the topic of agriculture, Ontario’s subsequent Climate Change Action Plan: 2016 - 2020 featured a goal of having agriculture supply carbon offsets to the cap-and-trade market (Ontario 2016: 50 - 53). Connected with this, the plan announced intended funding in the amount of $30 million that would be put toward developing and implementing a strategy for carbon sequestration through agricultural soil health and conservation, which would help “lay the groundwork for potential participation in Ontario’s carbon offset market” (ibid. 52, 78).

As for the situation in Quebec, Union Paysanne has commented less on policies directly connected with agriculture and climate change, focusing instead on promoting ecological farming models and connected struggles. For instance, the organization has argued for the gradual replacement of Quebec’s agricultural income stabilization insurance program (Assurance Stabilisation des Revenus Agricoles, ASRA) with an alternative model that would favour ecologically sustainable production and not provide structural advantages to large-scale producers. Such an alternative would be based on universal access, geared toward providing a fair proportion of support for family farmers, while gradually excluding large, vertically integrated operations from the insurance program. Union Paysanne suggests that subsidies need to be available based on a Contrat vert (‘Green Contract’) between producers and the state that would incentivize the protection of natural resources and the productive use of agricultural lands (Union Paysanne 2013).
4.3 - Food sovereignty in the mainstream

As the NFU and Union Paysanne’s experiences demonstrate, there is good reason to engage with the state (or ‘political society’ in Gramscian terms) in order to try to shift the food system toward agroecological production and food sovereignty. This is especially clear given that public policies have facilitated the establishment of the corporate and industrial agricultural regime that exists throughout Canada today. However, the NFU and Union Paysanne are faced with the potential for their policy proposals to be heard, but effectively ignored, as more reformist or distinctively neoliberal capitalist policies are put forward by actors that have closer ties with government—a prospect that is particularly likely in Quebec.

An additional challenge, as I will discuss throughout this section, is that the state may selectively integrate food sovereignty demands into policy frameworks, rather than ignoring these proposals outright. This partial adoption of food sovereignty undermines the potential for a political movement to rally around a more comprehensive and ostensibly more radical suite of interrelated changes. This is particularly clear in terms of developments that have taken place in Quebec since the early 2000s.56

Defensive localism in Quebec

As a young member of Union Paysanne from Outaouais, Quebec told me, food sovereignty is now a concept that is known in the province, however, in his words:

56 See Dale (2017) for a more detailed account of these events, and of struggles for food sovereignty in Quebec in general.
The sense I get is that it’s more used in terms of food self-sufficiency. …I feel like people just basically think, “Well, if …in Quebec I can buy all my food that’s grown in Quebec, well then that’s food sovereignty.” And I think the definition can be much more complicated than that. (Interview, June 5, 2016)

A ‘defensive localism’ is therefore being taken up in Quebec. This term refers to the unreflective adoption of localism as a goal in itself, rather than a strategy to be aligned with a wide range of other demands for structural transformation related to agriculture and food (Born and Purcell 2006; Winter 2003). The popularization of a narrow understanding of food sovereignty within Quebec has been the result of a gradual process, and it is one for which the monopoly syndicate, UPA, is at least partly responsible. UPA reacted defensively to Union Paysanne’s establishment and success in recruiting members in its early years. As noted by Silvestro (2008: 124), this defensive position was reflected in changes in terminology within UPA’s own weekly newspaper and online journal, which generally conveys the syndicate’s official discourse:

Any reader of La Terre de chez nous would find it striking that, since the birth of Union Paysanne, UPA has clearly appropriated its language, by taking to talking about “human-scale farms,” about diversified farms, about fairness, about food sovereignty, about peasantry.

This trend toward the co-optation of food sovereignty was especially clear both during and following the establishment of the ministry of agriculture’s (MAPAQ’s) Commission sur l’Avenir de l’Agriculture et de l’Agroalimentaire Québécois (CAAAQ)—a body set up in 2006 to undertake a province-wide review of the challenges facing the agricultural sector (Bouchard 2014: 116-117). The Commission carried out widespread public consultations, which took place in 15 regions and 27 municipalities and featured a total of 770 presentations by individuals and organizations, and then published what became known as the Pronovost Report (named after the Commission’s President.

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57 This is translated directly from the term used in French, which suggests that these farms are more ‘humane’ as well. Union Paysanne speaks of being “en faveur d’une agriculture et d’une alimentation à échelle humaine” (emphasis added). See https://unionpaysanne.com/missions-et-valeurs/
58 The ‘Quebec Commission on the Future of Agriculture and Agrifood’.
Jean Pronovost; CAAAQ 2008). Interestingly, during the consultations, UPA played a key role in establishing *la Coalition pour la souveraineté alimentaire,*\(^9\) which was a coalition in name only: The majority of the members listed as part of this coalition were associations, marketing boards, and regional groups already affiliated with UPA. In addition, this ‘coalition’ was only superficially interested in food sovereignty. Its calls were focused on, for example: the cultural importance of local food systems, agricultural policies that would contribute to ‘sustainable development,’ the labelling of foods according to their provenance, and an increase in the purchasing of local foods by retailers and public institutions in Quebec (see Déclaration de Montréal 2007; Paré 2012).

Surprisingly, despite UPA’s interventions that contrasted sharply with Union Paysanne’s proposals for food sovereignty, and despite the high number of submissions it received, the Commission’s final report was remarkably progressive. It was, in fact, very much in line with Union Paysanne’s vision of the changes for a transformed food and agricultural system in Quebec (Bouchard 2014: 117). Among the report’s 49 recommendations, the Commission argued in favour of modifying the allocation of agricultural financing to ensure that public funds support ecological farming practices and the transition to organic production, rather than the farms generating the highest volumes of production (CAAAQ 2008). The Commission also recommended: that marketing mechanisms shift to facilitate sales of niche and local products; that speculation on quota units in supply-managed sectors be gradually eliminated; that stricter controls be introduced to reduce the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and chemical inputs in agriculture; and that zoning laws change to support small-scale farms and complementary activities (ibid.). But the recommendation in the Pronovost Report that seemed to garner the most attention was the one that argued farmers should

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\(^9\) ‘The Food Sovereignty Coalition.’ See http://www.nourrirnotremonde.org
have a right to belong to one of a number of producers’ associations, and that their choice should be reconfirmed at set intervals—a proposal that, if adopted, would end UPA’s syndicate monopoly.

After several years of struggle, Union Paysanne’s efforts and perspectives seemed to have been validated by the Pronovost Report. However, UPA dismissed its recommendations, and the Minister of Agriculture at the time, a member of the Liberal Party, simply indicated that he was ‘open to’ the suggestions coming out of the report except for the dissolution of the syndicate monopoly (Bouchard 2014: 122). MAPAQ then acted upon some of the report’s more modest recommendations, but only committed to further studying the structural reforms for which it argued. One Quebec farmer I spoke with summarized the situation as follows:

There has been some momentum …but the Pronovost Report has been left sitting on a shelf. It hasn’t been applied, practically speaking. …Because there were other important recommendations in there; for example, regarding access to land… They talked about a lot of things… but there is still quite a lot of work to do. (Interview, June 1, 2016)

By the time the fall 2012 provincial election came around, two other reports had been released that complemented Union Paysanne’s demands, featuring analyses by experts that focused on agricultural land issues (Ouimet 2009) and financial support programs (Saint-Pierre 2009). However, the Liberal government seemed to have been too nervous about the potential political backlash that would come from UPA and others benefiting from the status quo to undertake any significant agricultural reforms. Food and agricultural issues were therefore not in the spotlight during the election.

Nevertheless, the party that took power was the sovereigntist Parti Québécois (PQ), which seemed quite willing to take up the language of food sovereignty, albeit in line with the narrow framework established by UPA and the Coalition pour la souveraineté alimentaire. When MAPAQ’s new PQ minister introduced the Politique de souveraineté alimentaire (‘Food Sovereignty Policy’) in May of 2013, this
policy lacked the far-reaching visions behind either Union Paysanne’s advocacy work or the recommendations within the Pronovost Report. The four focal points of the food sovereignty policy were:

1. the promotion of Quebec’s food (within the province but for external markets as well);
2. dynamic land use (assuring land access for future generations and for agricultural businesses);
3. the realization of the sector’s economic potential; and
4. sustainable development (including “responsible resource management”) (MAPAQ 2013).

MAPAQ thus limited itself to focusing on efforts such as increasing the consumption of food grown within the province (e.g. in supermarkets through state-funded advertisements, and in institutions through public procurement), and introducing a law that would reduce the amount of speculation on agricultural lands by foreign investors (while doing nothing about land grabbing driven from within Quebec).

In the end, the food sovereignty policy had a virtually imperceptible influence on relevant institutions before yet another election was called that would see, in April 2014, the PQ government unseated and the federalist Liberal Party return to power. Subsequently, MAPAQ’s strategic plan for 2015 to 2018 would make absolutely no use of terms such as ‘sovereign’ or ‘sovereignty’ (MAPAQ 2016). Generally speaking, this document does not reflect any intention to significantly reshape Quebec’s agribusiness-oriented food system.

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Defensive localism in the rest of Canada

Interestingly, while this example of the appropriation of the term ‘food sovereignty’ is striking, it is not the only such example in Canada. As discussed by Martin and Andrée (2014), the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA)—a national farm organization representing commodity groups and provincial organizations like the OFA—has also been known to use this language. In 2008, the CFA released a *Farm and Food Sovereignty and Security Declaration* that spoke of “the importance of both domestic and export markets for Canadian agriculture producers” while also expressing support for a farming approach that “includes but is not necessarily limited to intensive modern livestock production methods, biotechnology and pest management products” (CFA cited in Martin and Andrée 2014: 188). This clearly demonstrates a blatant misalignment of the CFA’s aspirations and the meaning of food sovereignty promoted by La Vía Campesina, and it seems that the CFA has in recent years desisted from (mis)using the term (based on documents available online); however, it must be noted that this threat of co-optation is not limited to Quebec, and it could certainly reappear if a push for food sovereignty gains momentum throughout Canada.

At the same time, there is the possibility of select demands related to food sovereignty being taken up in isolation. Ontario’s *Local Food Act*, which the Liberal government announced in 2013, illustrates how the demand for a re-localization of food systems can be supported, albeit modestly, with no thought apparently given to ecological production practices, labour and economic justice, democracy in the food system, and so on. As such, the Local Food Act is another example of ‘defensive localism’ in action (Born and Purcell 2006; Winter 2003). There are parallels, to be sure, between this Act in Ontario and Quebec’s short-lived food sovereignty policy. While the former does not convey undertones of national pride to the same extent, it nevertheless also focuses on economic growth and features weak targets.
To elaborate, since it has come into effect, the Local Food Act has spurned the development of a strategy that takes as its objectives: (1) increasing food literacy with the aim of promoting local food consumption, (2) facilitating the identification of, and access to, local foods, and (3) increasing the production of local foods so that “Ontario’s agri-food sector is more competitive, productive and responsive to consumer demand” (Ontario 2017: 6; cf. OMAFRA 2017). With regard to these objectives, the Act defines local food as “(a) food produced or harvested in Ontario, including forest or freshwater food, and (b) subject to any limitations in the regulations, food and beverages made in Ontario if they include ingredients produced or harvested in Ontario” (Legislative Assembly of Ontario 2013). This certainly deserves critical scrutiny given that the size of the province means that food could travel thousands of kilometres and be considered ‘local,’ whereas food coming across the border from Manitoba, Quebec, Michigan, Minnesota or New York would not be, even if it travelled less than fifty kilometres.

More importantly, however, the Act has not seemed to have led to any ambitious goal setting or actions. For example, the government has proclaimed that the first full week of June each year will be ‘Local Food Week,’ just as it has begun to offer farmers a modest tax credit for in-kind donations made to community organizations such as food banks (Ontario 2017). In addition, the Province has allocated grants to entrepreneurs, institutions and established businesses through the Local Food Investment Fund to promote local food literacy, access and purchases, and it is celebrating ‘innovations’ in the local food sector—even when it is questionable how much support for these innovations are a result of the Local Food Act and its concomitant strategy (ibid.).
On top of the vague targets articulated by the government on these matters, these approaches to localizing the food system are arguably politically palatable, ‘feel good’ efforts to curry favour with voters while not threatening the status quo. The relevant Minister’s discourses are predictable, with his celebration of the “agri-food industry” as an “economic force, generating more than $36 billion in annual GDP and supporting 790,000 jobs in the province” (ibid.: 4). Yet it is also clear that the Province intends to leverage international trade as a means to encourage growth in this sector: In a strikingly contradictory section of the latest Local Food Report, the ministry celebrates a recent “Agri-Food Trade Mission to India to attract new investment and continue to grow the agri-food sector globally” (ibid. 10). Perhaps as a means to justify the apparent disjuncture with the government’s purported aim to localize the province’s food system, the report states:

A strong position at home gives Ontario’s agri-food sector a solid base to expand globally translating into more jobs for the Ontario economy. The first step is to increase awareness with international customers of the range and quality of Ontario food products, and with Ontario agri-food businesses of exciting global opportunities (ibid.).

As it stands, the government seems to not only be promoting a ‘defensive’ localism, but also a fairly diluted localism. In addition, this version of localism has also been promoted by the Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change, which includes the consumption of “made-in-Ontario food and goods” as one of four key ways through which residents can fight climate change, as this approach to purchasing will “cut down on pollution, processing and refrigeration” (Ontario 2018). Clearly, in this context, the localization of the food system can be aligned with individualism and commodity fetishism as an approach to socio-ecological problems.

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The glowing promise of a national food policy

A recent development that must be mentioned concerns the fact that the Canadian government has announced that it will be introducing a national food policy for the first time in history. This announcement, which came in May 2017, was followed by a series of consultations through which the federal government sought to hear from “Canadians and stakeholders” about their priorities for the development of this food policy (see Government of Canada 2017). Indubitably, opinions as to what form such a policy should take will be divergent. Calls for a national food policy have been multiplying in recent years, with several food system actors articulating their vision on the matter well before this policy was promised.

In 2011, for example, the People’s Food Policy Project led to the release of Resetting the Table: A People’s Food Policy for Canada (PFPP 2015), following discussions and grassroots meetings that involved approximately 3500 Canadians and Indigenous people. The report covered a wide diversity of themes, and it was in fact inspired by an earlier initiative called the People’s Food Commission and the document it produced in 1980, The Land of Milk and Money. Based on a food sovereignty framework—in part due to the involvement of the NFU in the organizing of the project—Resetting the Table discusses how an effective food policy is needed to address issues such as food insecurity, health issues, a host of social justice matters, and climate change and other environmental problems (ibid.). Topics and associated policy recommendations ranged from Indigenous food sovereignty and fisheries to international trade and food system governance (ibid.; see also Martin and Andrée 2017). Since the release of the report, it has been promoted—along with ongoing advocacy for a national food policy—by Food Secure Canada (FSC), a non-profit that describes itself as a “a pan-Canadian alliance of organizations and individuals working together to advance food security and
food sovereignty through three inter-locking goals: zero hunger, healthy and safe food, and sustainable food systems” (FSC n.d.).

As suggested, however, this has not been the only voice expressing an interest in a federal government-led food policy. Within a few years of the release of Resetting the Table, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (2011) issued a white paper called Toward a National Food Strategy, and the Conference Board of Canada (2014) put out its own report, From Opportunity to Achievement: Canadian Food Strategy (see also Gibson 2014; Hui 2016). The former had as a lead sponsor agrochemical and biotechnology giant Syngenta, and it focused on farm incomes and the promotion of local food, whereas the latter was funded by corporations such as Heinz Canada, Maple Leaf Foods and Nestlé Canada, and, accordingly, focused on the success of the agri-food industry, international trade, and techno-managerial approaches to relevant issues and research efforts (ibid.). With well-resourced organizations such as these seeking to influence the direction of the forthcoming national food policy, it is worth contemplating how much of an emphasis on food sovereignty and agroecology will be on display in the policy.

There is reason to approach the federal government’s efforts on this matter with a healthy dose of scepticism, I would argue, in part because of the framing initially laid out at the beginning of the consultation period. To elaborate, the government stated that it would be considering four key themes as it developed a food policy for Canada: “Increasing access to affordable food; Improving health and food safety; Conserving our soil, water, and air; [and] Growing more high-quality food” (Government of Canada 2017). At a glance, these thematic areas may not seem problematic, nor would the notion of “Using environmentally sustainable practices to ensure Canadians have a long-term, reliable, and abundant supply of food” (ibid.); however, the statements on the government’s
website are vague and peppered with ambiguous and/or potentially misleading words such as “sustainable.” At the same time, one can expect that the focus on the fourth of these themes, ‘growing more high-quality food,’ may compromise the other three, particularly as the government seems intent on maintaining discourses and supporting practices associated with Canada feeding the world and an agri-food sector that is a key “driver of economic growth” (ibid.).

It is expected that the federal government will release details of its national food policy in 2019. In the meantime, food system actors are determinedly advocating for policy measures that they would like to see included. One of the most interesting, and perhaps troubling, developments on this front concerns the fact that several actors have been asserting that a national food policy council should be central to the government’s plans (Ad Hoc Working Group for Food Policy Governance 2017). While the notion of a national food policy council is not itself problematic, what is troubling is that this advocacy is coming from organizations like the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, corporations like Maple Leaf Foods, and a range of commodity groups and industry associations. In addition, the McConnell Foundation is involved, as is the industry-connected Arrell Food Institute at the University of Guelph, and, notably, Food Secure Canada (ibid.). If actors such as these establish a council to inform the government’s food policy, and adhere to their stated intention to focus on inclusivity and pursue consensus building (ibid.), it is highly doubtful that the spirit of the People’s Food Policy Project will permeate the proceedings. At worst, this may simply serve as another example of the co-optation of a key food sovereignty-related demand: the democratic governance of the food system.

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4.4 - Building a historic bloc for food sovereignty

What is to be done when institutionalization seems to be at once an important strategy for the advancement of food sovereignty, while also carrying with it the real threat of the concept being co-opted? How can organizations like the NFU and Union Paysanne advocate for food sovereignty without seeing their organizing efforts stymied by modest reforms that may placate some food system actors who are content with an incremental political approach? In this final section I discuss why alliance building must be an essential accompaniment to policy-related struggles for a more socio-ecologically just food system, offering some suggestions as to how this may be approached. As I point out, there evidently needs to be a strategic manner to forging alliances, and a thorough appreciation of the practical and political difficulties associated with establishing longer-term connections with existing and potential allies.

Moving beyond militant particularism

To be sure, both the NFU and Union Paysanne already connect with like-minded groups on a fairly regular basis, and throughout my field research I became aware of examples of many such connections. However, it is clear that the majority of partnerships pursued by these organizations are with other groups already involved in advocacy related to food and agriculture—from organizations promoting localized and ecological food production models (including through farmer training, consumer education and more), to non-profits taking on specific issues of relevance (such as genetically modified foods, healthy diets and food insecurity). These connections are positive, but they are unlikely to generate the kind of political momentum that will overcome the resistance to food sovereignty and agroecology coming from groups like the CFA, UPA in Quebec, and industry associations. As mentioned in Chapter 2, in his discussion of militant particularism, Harvey (1996:
Ch. 1) outlined the limitations that come with groups working for social change by focussing narrowly on localized or issue-specific campaigns. To this we can add, for clarity’s sake, sector-specific campaigns. Although these struggles are often the most concrete in their ability to speak to the material needs and emotional loyalties of actors involved, they often overlook the potential for diverse place-based struggles to converge and feed into a more transformative movement. In other words, while militant particularist efforts are important in their own right, a Gramscian approach emphasizes a strategy that also works toward the establishment of a coordinated struggle, and a collective subjectivity, that will contribute to a far-reaching war of position (Sanbonmatsu 2004)

With this in mind, and given the connections between agroecology and climate change mitigation strategies discussed in Chapter 3, as I carried out my research I sought to explore the potential for the NFU and Union Paysanne to build alliances with environmental groups—This being just one possible route to begin moving beyond militant particularism. While in Chapter 1 I described the lack of engagement on the part of environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) in terms of taking up agricultural issues in relation to climate change, here I will lay out some important practical and political factors that should be understood in this regard. These are factors that are worth considering in terms of alliance building generally in the Canadian context when it comes to efforts to bridge food sovereignty and climate change activism.

THE PRACTICAL: Perhaps the most obvious and most challenging practical reason that these farmers’ organizations have not built stronger connections with ENGOs is that they have very limited resources with which to work. Financially, both the NFU and Union Paysanne contend with the reality that their small budgets primarily depend on membership fees, occasional grants, and donations from supporters. As a result, these organizations employ very few staff members and
therefore rely on members’ volunteerism to propel the work of various committees and local organizing efforts. For farmers, the challenge of dedicating time to activism cannot be understated. One Union Paysanne member was clear about the constraints on her time when she said, “We work 9 to 5 in the winter, and 5 to 9 in the summer.” If anything this was an understatement, as ecological farmers like her tend to only have about three months of the year in which to work more regular hours; and, in addition, it is notable that over the ten days during which I volunteered at her farm, there were at least two occasions wherein she and her partner ended up working until approximately 1 o’clock in the morning.

On this same theme, multiple farmers I interviewed raised the fact that, demographically, they only make up approximately one percent of the Canadian population. This human resource constraint is exacerbated by the fact that the NFU and Union Paysanne are relatively marginal farm organizations in comparison to the membership bases of, for example, the CFA and UPA. This would seem to underline the importance of building alliances yet, as one woman who is involved with Union Paysanne stated, “It’s always a question of resources. Who is going to go sit on those committees or those alliances? That takes even more time, and we already have a tough time managing our own committees” (Interview, June 8, 2016). On this point, it would also be worth considering whether Canadian ENGOs have the resources to do this kind of work, even though their budgets may be significantly larger. Apparently they do not: A staff member of one of the environmental organizations mentioned in Chapter 1 with whom I spoke at a one-day organic food conference

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60 Field notes, Oct. 7-18, 2015.
61 According to Statistics Canada (2017b), the “2016 Census of Agriculture counted 271,935 farm operators on agricultural operations.” Therefore, using an approximated population count of 36.2 million Canadians, this suggests that farmers make up approximately 0.75 percent of the population.
stated that they simply do not have any employees with the expertise to delve into the connections between climate change and agriculture.  

THE POLITICAL: This leads to a more political question, however, which concerns whether ENGOs have the motivation to substantially engage in agricultural issues. Exploring relatively esoteric policy matters such as supply management and rural land legislation may simply be deemed strategically unwise for these organizations, as they need to focus on keeping their supporters emotionally engaged. The realities of the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) are pertinent here, as this of course has to do with funding, and the targeting of issues that are most likely to bring in donations (Smith A. 2007). One farmer activist involved with the NFU had this to say when asked about the potential for collaboration with ENGOs:

[There are] organizations that I wouldn't work with […] as there are certainly some organizations that are fairly opportunistic in their campaigns… You know, some NGOs that like to take credit for things and jump from campaign to campaign based on whatever is faddish. So, I don’t feel like they would be good allies because agroecology and climate change are both long-term projects that will require a lot of long-term sustained input. (Interview, May 26, 2016)

On this theme, another farmer who has long been engaged with the NFU commented that there is also sometimes a lack of reciprocity from ENGOs, as there can be requests from environmental organizations for the NFU to do … research … or to bring the voice of farmers to this or that … campaign […And] I know they’re all strapped too, but there’s no corresponding, “Well, if you do that, [then] we can provide some funding.” And I think in some cases… it’s really a request that “you’ll support our position” … as opposed to really listening to what the position might be from farmers. (Interview Dec. 9, 2015)

Given the political realities of the NPIC and militant particularism, it is understandable that she therefore expressed how important it is “that the limited resources that the NFU has … flow first to

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acting to the benefit of farmers,” and another farmer mentioned that there may even be concerns that if the NFU were to focus too much on non-farming issues then it may compromise their position as an *agricultural* organization with specific expertise.\(^6^3\) Thus, the question of motivation also extends to food sovereignty proponents themselves. As a non-farming member of Union Paysanne stated, “I don’t know whether we have the capacity for the alliances, but …it’s not *just* the capacity; it’s really sort of the will to do it…” and she expressed disappointment that the organization had not made alliance building more of a priority (Interview, Nov. 9, 2016).

There are also other political factors that may have dampened the NFU and Union Paysanne’s enthusiasm for building longer-term connections with environmental organizations. For one, ENGOs may be prone to adopting more reformist positions, or aligning themselves with mainstream agricultural organizations, as a means to increase their likelihood of influencing government policy. To draw from an example in Quebec, Équiterre was mentioned in several interviews as an example of an NGO that is working on both environmental issues (including advocating for fossil-fuel free transportation options) and food issues (primarily through promoting Community Supported Agriculture programs and organic farming).\(^6^4\) However, Équiterre has aligned itself with UPA, taking up the weak interpretation of food sovereignty promoted by the *Coalition pour la souveraineté alimentaire* (Interviews Aug. 24, 2015 and June 8, 2016). Some Union Paysanne members seem to feel that this is a pragmatic approach (“That’s how it works… You have to work on the inside,” one farmer stated; Interview Sept. 9, 2015), whereas others see this as a compromised strategy, lacking in integrity. As one young farmer expressed, Équiterre may garner more political favour by supporting the syndicate monopoly, and by promoting responsible consumption rather than taking a critical stance against Monsanto or GMOs, but this effectively

\(^{63}\) Field notes, Oct. 27–31, 2015.  
\(^{64}\) See http://equiterre.org/
marginalizes the systemic solutions such as peasant agroecology that are being promoted by La Vía Campesina and its member organizations (Interview Aug. 24, 2015).

During a workshop at one NFU convention, a farmer from British Columbia was also clearly concerned about the risks associated with building coalitions when she stated that this approach may prevent organizers from considering more militant tactics such as direct action, just as groups may be compelled to lower their expectations as they find common ground with others in terms of political demands.\(^{65}\) This is a valid concern with respect to the NPIC, given that charitable organizations are restricted in terms of the amount of advocacy that they can engage in,\(^ {66}\) and this echoes arguments made by scholars about the challenges associated with taking a ‘big tent’ approach to advancing food sovereignty politics (Patel 2010; cf. Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011).

At the same time, the NFU and Union Paysanne would likely be unable to build important alliances if their members were to consistently adhere to uncompromising or radical positions in their organizing. As one NFU member articulated:

People who …don’t have as much experience and tend to be more focused on ideological purity …are very important in a lot of movements, but they don’t always bring movements together in the first place, right? They provide a lot of driving energy, and they provide energy to …explore new ways of taking action, but they [do] not necessarily [have the] qualities that help [with] building alliances between people who are coming from different places to start with.

And I think …one of the reasons that our Local\(^ {67}\) here has been so successful is because it has a lot of bridge-builders in it. It has a lot people who know a lot of people …and who are driven by very deep feelings and convictions, but not just by the idea of those convictions. They actually want to see those things practically come into place, and are willing to collaborate on projects that move forward on those things, and won’t limit themselves to

\(^{65}\) Field notes, Nov. 23-25, 2017.

\(^{66}\) It is worth noting that David Suzuki is actually an associate (non-farmer) member of the NFU, and that he is often outspoken on political matters when discussing climate change, however he has had to distance himself from the foundation that bears his name in recent years so as to not compromise its status as a charity.

\(^{67}\) As previously indicated, within Ontario, the NFU is divided into Locals, where organizing takes place at a smaller scale.
only things that meet a certain measure of political purity or ideological radicalism.  
(Interview, May 26, 2016)

This quote is significant in that it draws attention to the complexity of building alliances, and the difficult decisions that groups advocating for food sovereignty will need to make if they are to reach out to potential allies as a longer-term strategic undertaking. From a Gramscian standpoint, one could consider how unlikely it is for political society to acquiesce and prioritize institutionalizing agroecology and food sovereignty, unless civil society rallies around these demands; and, at present, it is clear that the corporate food and agricultural lobby dominates in its influence. Until these features of the ‘integral state’ change, the NFU and Union Paysanne will need to reconcile radical views on food sovereignty with an approach that balances the practical and political challenges described here.

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Canada’s ‘subaltern’

One possible way to counter the limitations associated with the NPIC would be for the NFU and Union Paysanne to do more to connect with individuals and communities directly affected by Canada’s socio-ecologically unsustainable food system, rather than focusing on establishing links with charitable organizations and other NGOs. As discussed, climate change is one potential topic around which to build interest in food sovereignty and agroecology (as one livestock farmer and NFU member said to me emphatically, “It’s such low-hanging fruit”; Interview, June 3, 2016); therefore these organizations could strive to garner support from activists and others concerned about this environmental issue, as opposed to ENGOs.
However, as one Union Paysanne member stressed in an interview, climate change is just one of many possible reasons to support food sovereignty, even if it is a good one (Interview, November 27, 2015). This is an important point. To move past militant particularism, to transcend a capitalocentric stance that primarily critiques the existing system without contributing to meaningful alternatives, it is strategically worthwhile for food sovereignty proponents to consider which social groups will broadly benefit from systemic transformation within (and beyond) the food system. Gramsci’s (2015) discussion of the Southern Question is germane here. He saw that a hegemonic shift in Italy during his day would only come from groups organizing beyond the limits of their geographically and issue-based concerns. A new historic bloc for Gramsci would have to involve, crucially, peasants in the south and workers of industrial centres in the north, despite their cultural differences and distinct positionalities with regard to their embeddedness in the capitalist economy. He wrote, in fact, of the need to understand “that only two social forces are essentially national and bearers of the future: the proletariat and the peasants” (ibid.: 46). However, Gramsci was writing about the peasant masses of southern Italy. As discussed above, no such mass of farmers exists in Canada today. Therefore, strategic alliances will need to be reconsidered and expanded in this context.

Working from Gramsci’s example, I can think of three key groups that have been rendered ‘subaltern’ in Canada and that could contribute significantly to the advancement of a robust coalition, a new historic bloc, taking up food sovereignty as a central demand:

1. Indigenous peoples: Even though there is great cultural and socio-economic diversity among the many First Nations, Métis and Inuit groups across the country, there is no question that the settler-colonial and capitalist food system has greatly compromised Indigenous food sovereignty (see Daschuk 2013; Morrison 2011). Counterhegemonic changes would see
treaties honoured, land returned to Indigenous communities to help them expand traditional
food provisioning and cultivating practices, and compensation dispensed for years of cultural
genocide and eco-genocide (Kepkiewicz and Dale 2018; Morrison 2011).

2. **Racialized workers in the food system:** The plight of migrant farm workers, who are especially
vulnerable due to their precarious employment status in Canada (Reid-Musson 2017; Weiler,
Otero and Wittman 2016), is just one indication of the fact that racialized labour is
disproportionately exploited in order to keep the capitalist food system running (Holt-
Giménez 2018; Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011). Counterhegemonic changes would see
migrant farm workers granted status upon arrival in Canada,68 and all labourers—from those
in retail to food processing and beyond—would receive fair wages, health and safety
protections, and the right to unionize.

3. **Low-income people in Canada:** It is estimated that there are over 4 million people in this country
who are relying on food banks or other forms of emergency food assistance, or who are
facing the material deprivation that comes with living in poverty and struggling to put food
on the table (Dachner and Tarasuk 2017). Counterhegemonic changes would see people
receive stable and sufficient income levels that would allow them to equally benefit from the
production of healthy, localized and ecologically grown food, just as affordable housing
policies and adequate social service provisioning would ensure that their money is not
inappropriately funneled elsewhere.69

68 See the Coalition for Migrant Worker Rights Canada website: http://migrantrights.ca
69 We could undoubtedly add to the three examples listed here, such as by discussing how women in general are
disproportionately disadvantaged both in terms of wage labour in the food system and the uncompensated work of
social reproduction (Allen and Sachs 2007; Brady et al. 2017). Of course, women significantly make up a percentage of
each of these three groups, which is why I have not listed them separately, for simplicity of argumentation.
Without getting into the complexities of intersectional identities involved, the three groups listed here serve as illustrations of directions that might be pursued in the building of a new historic bloc in Canada. This vision may seem idealistic, but it is indeed to the imagination of real transformation that I hope it contributes (see Smith N. 2009). I simply stress here that pragmatic decisions about the formation of strategic alliances need to be accompanied by a vision of the more radical changes that would be intertwined with the realization of food sovereignty in this country.

In many ways, a Gramscian view on these matters compels a reformulation of the agrarian question. With so few farmers remaining in Canada—particularly those engaging in ecological agriculture—instead of focusing solely on how groups of farmers bifurcate based on their class positionalities, we can ask: Who will align with farmers as they advocate for food sovereignty and agroecology? As noted by the reference to the three social groups listed above, there are those whose interests may be well served by a broad social transformation that targets the food system as a jumping-off point.

This is not to suggest that food sovereignty advocates would no longer have to confront the practical and political challenges associated with alliance building—from resource limitations to a potential lack of motivation to organize beyond the agricultural sector. Working for a food system that encompasses land justice, racial justice and income equality will also certainly put these groups at odds with the many actors whose interests are well served within the status quo of the existing system. Importantly, this can in fact include members of groups like the NFU and Union Paysanne who are embedded in capitalist land and labour relations, and who may thus hesitate to support radical change. Tensions will arise then, as ‘bridge-builders’ contributing to food sovereignty struggles negotiate the pull between pragmatic strategies and radical ideals. Specific tensions will also need to be resolved around the different positionalities of farmers and their potential allies. In part
this is because Canadian farmers cannot be considered subaltern themselves. While they may be marginalized and disadvantaged within the corporate food regime, they are more likely to experience middle-class lifestyles and relative privilege compared to the three groups described above.\(^7\)

In particular, issues such as landownership will need to be resolved with regard to the legacies of ongoing settler colonialism that have facilitated Canadian agriculture for over a century (Kepkiewicz 2017). On this point, it is worth stressing that there are not only differences in terms of economic interests between farmers and their potential allies; there are also substantial cultural issues that must be addressed. The subject of landownership draws attention to significant difficulties that will be associated with building solidarity with Indigenous peoples. These difficulties must not be glossed over. In general, as Rotz (2017) discusses, there are overlaps between histories of settler colonialism and instances of racist behaviour or expressions that are sometimes demonstrated by Canadian farmers. As she notes, statistics show that “[n]early all farmland today is managed by people with white settler ancestry” (ibid.: 160), and farmers she interviewed tended to rely on racially hierarchical narratives and settler colonial logics to support or justify the social and material dominance they hold.

The cultural clearly cannot be separated from the economic in this discussion, but it does deserve to be brought into focus. Farmers’ tendency to favour private landownership as their preferred method of land access, for instance (Dennis and Wittman 2014), recalls longstanding social narratives about the need to own land privately in order to be a good steward of it (harking back to John Locke’s philosophies). As I have discussed with my colleague, Lauren Kepkiewicz:

\(^7\) This privilege can also include inherited wealth, which is not limited to farmers involved in intergenerational agricultural operations.
The embeddedness of this cultural phenomenon speaks to the agrarian romanticism that links farmland preservation (through private ownership) and, following Aldo Leopold, a land ethic that informs environmental stewardship... Small-scale organic farmers see private property as a way to ensure their substantial investments in and relationships with the land are not lost, and to ensure the maintenance of ecologically sustainable farming practices remain in place so that local communities can access organic food. (Kepkiewicz and Dale 2018: 6)

While these preferences of farmers may, at a superficial glance, seem harmless enough, it is important to note that the discourses of ‘improving’ land through farming (in order to render it ‘productive’), was at the heart of the violent dispossession of Indigenous peoples as settlers colonized what is now Canada. Furthermore, the perpetuation of these cultural motifs and narratives contributes to the ongoing marginalization of Indigenous peoples, who currently have access to only 0.2 percent of land in this country (through the reserve system), despite having a growing population that is closer to 3 percent of the total (Manuel 2017).

Honouring treaties and building relationships with Indigenous peoples will thus require significant consideration of the cultural and economic aspects of the land question in Canada, and ultimately land restitution will need to be part of a decolonial approach to food sovereignty. Fortunately, while these issues are incredibly challenging politically, many farmers I engaged with throughout my research demonstrated that they are interested in contributing to such efforts. The NFU, for example, has started taking some important steps in this direction through its Indigenous Solidarity Working Group. This group has ensured that Indigenous speakers (including Indigenous farmers) are featured at national conventions, and that Indigenous food sovereignty is the subject of articles in its newsletter, the Union Farmer Quarterly. Of course, there is much more work to do on this front, and the issues I have discussed here are simply an illustration of the tremendous cultural and political challenges that will need to be overcome as farming organizations build alliances with other
potential food sovereignty proponents, including racialized food and agricultural workers, and low-income people across Canada.

As Gramsci (2015) noted in *The Southern Question*, geographical connections are also important to consider with regard to the building of alliances among social groups. Practically speaking, organizing at the local level will thus be key to the NFU and Union Paysanne’s success in this regard. In Ontario, where the NFU is an accredited farm organization, the structure of ‘Locals’ already exists, uniting farmers in a fairly concentrated geographic area (typically a few counties or municipalities). This could expand in provinces where the NFU does not have accreditation status, just as Union Paysanne would benefit from growth in its membership that would enable it to emulate local structures that the UPA already has in place across Quebec. This local organizing is important because it provides a practical way for farmers and their potential allies to develop social bonds, come to understand each other’s struggles, and collaborate effectively on specific campaigns.

My experience volunteering as an associate/citizen member of the NFU and Union Paysanne has made it clear that it can be incredibly important for organizing at the local level to take place. For example, the ability of individual organizers to be able to connect with like-minded groups by attending meetings and events in person is significantly more impactful than organizing over great distances, despite all of the teleconferencing and online technologies that are available today. In particular, establishing relationships at the local level, where personal connections can be fostered, will be crucial where building solidarity with different groups will require resolving underlying tensions, such as between farmers and Indigenous peoples and migrant workers.

In sum, it is not just a confrontation with capitalism with which a Gramscian historic bloc would be faced. For food sovereignty proponents to build alliances with Canada’s subaltern, they will need to
simultaneously grapple with the often-overlapping forms of exploitation erected by racism, patriarchy, and ongoing settler colonialism. It is therefore worth taking a broader view on the agrarian question in considering how a new historic bloc could be established in a country where capitalism sometimes, but not always, operates on the same frequencies as these other forms of exploitation. Farmers will evidently need to establish the kind of dynamic campaigns for food sovereignty that would serve as an invitation for other social groups to align with them.

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4.5 - Conclusion

In this chapter I have dedicated significant space to a discussion of the kinds of policies for which the NFU and Union Paysanne have been advocating in recent years, and I have done so to demonstrate how important institutionalization can be to the advancement of food sovereignty and a more ecological food production system in Canada. However, it is clear based on both the socio-political context and the recent developments in Quebec and elsewhere, that there is a very real risk of food sovereignty being co-opted, rendered technocratic, and absorbed largely within the status quo of the corporate food regime. Without question, ‘sovereignty’ has specific cultural implications in Quebec. Moreover, the syndicate monopoly representing farmers in Quebec serves as an obstacle to genuine socio-ecological transformation in agriculture in the province. But the political challenges associated with advancing food sovereignty are significant across the country. As such, for example, there is the possibility that liberal, reformist policy efforts will see supply management protected and agricultural lands preserved, but without addressing the broader changes that need to take place in order for agroecology to be scaled out across Canada. Similarly, as demonstrated by developments in Ontario, governmental discussions of the links between climate change and agriculture may see food
production brought into carbon offsetting regimes that will do more for markets than they will to actually reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

To counter these trends and challenges, strategic alliances will be crucial to ensuring that agriculture is politicized as part of an agenda for broader systemic transformation. However, as indicated by the practical and political challenges associated with forging connections with ENGOs, this will not be an easy task. Organizations like the NFU and Union Paysanne will undoubtedly be faced with difficult decisions if they are to prioritize alliance building in the coming years, as their efforts could easily be constrained by their limited resources, and by the political implications of the non-profit industrial complex, but also by an adherence to ideological purity based on an uncompromising view of food sovereignty as a radical alternative. I have suggested that the institutionalization of food sovereignty and the building of a social movement for food sovereignty need to be held in dialectical tension. Both approaches involve substantial challenges, yet both are essential to the success of these struggles. I have also suggested that a historic bloc for food sovereignty should involve a broader consideration of the subaltern groups that are facing some of the most severe difficulties under the current system; and the examples I provided point to the vast array of issues inherently linked to efforts to advance food sovereignty and agroecology in Canada—from Indigenous rights and immigration policy to labour laws and social service provisioning.

In short, there is a clear need for a reflexive vision of food sovereignty in this country. In Gramscian terms, it must be a vision informed by the need for a war of position that brings together forces within civil society to push for significant change at the level of the state (political society). It must be a vision that is based on socio-political equality and that refuses to be compromised according to militant particularism, even though particularist struggles are important in their own right. And it
must be a vision advanced by real political movements and forces, constituted by institutional and material struggles, rather than articulated merely as an abstraction. The NFU and Union Paysanne will thus need to broadly consider the relevance of the agrarian question to their policy-related and political efforts, as they look for allies that may align with farmers and consider how their interests complement those of other social groups within a system that is at once capitalist, colonial, racist and patriarchal. As indicated at the outset of this chapter, the Basic Income Guarantee policy resolution taken up by the NFU in 2016 provides evidence of these groups not being solely inwardly looking as they think about their advocacy efforts. Perhaps this will expand, despite these organizations’ limited resources and other challenges, as they contribute to the development of a counterhegemonic bloc that takes up food sovereignty as one of its key demands.
Chapter 5

Food sovereignty and agroecology as counterhegemony: Radical pedagogy and the war of position

5.1 - Political education and the translatability of anticapitalism

*Agroecology: A case for class struggle and socialism?*

Given that agroecology is just emerging as a concept in the Canadian context, it is relatively rare to hear even National Farmers Union (NFU) and Union Paysanne members use the term in conversation. It is rarer still to hear it discussed in relation to the capitalist system, and so I am keenly intrigued to listen to an associate member of the NFU deliver a presentation entitled, *Agroecology: A case for class struggle and socialism*. It is March 2016, and we are seated around tables at a spacious lodge, approximately 100 kilometres outside of Edmonton, Alberta. In attendance are 25 young farmers from across the country, plus myself and the presenter, Alison, and it is the first day of a three-day youth retreat that has been organized by the NFU Youth President and Youth Vice-President. This is one of three such events that I attended while conducting my research, and the format we are using for the retreat—wherein educational and strategy sessions are horizontally co-organized and led by participants themselves—has been inspired by La Vía Campesina.

Alison, in fact, is reporting back from a six-week course she attended in Brazil on behalf of the NFU, which was run by the movement’s largest member organization, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST, or Landless Workers’ Movement). The course, which

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71 Not her real name.
brought together approximately 60 participants from 20 countries, was an intensive *formação*—a Portuguese word that can be translated as ‘training’ or ‘instruction,’ but which connotes a blending of practical and political education.\(^{72}\) Although the MST has run many such courses, this was the first international gathering of its kind to be offered in English. Alison explains how they formally covered a range of topics—from political economy and Marxist-Leninism to the reproduction of capital in agriculture—while also engaging in daily practices that made up a political training in their own right. The MST members who led the course were keen to emphasize that cooperatively participating in cooking, cleaning and other aspects of social reproduction was an important way to come to understand collective responsibility. It is, in fact, a central aspect of the methodology employed by the movement within its hundreds of camps and settlements across Brazil.\(^{73}\) As Alison noted, the MST feels that this organizational model “poses its greatest challenge to capitalism” in that it is effectively demonstrating the potential for a non-hierarchical socialist structure of collective living.\(^{74}\)

In general, Alison’s presentation was interesting in that it brought agroecology and food sovereignty into conversation with a number of themes, including critiques of capitalism and examples of prefigurative politics. The latter refers to the notion, commonly associated with anarchist principles (Graeber 2004, 2011; cf. Scott 2012), of carving out niches of mutual aid and collective organizing to demonstrate that alternative (non-capitalist) systems can exist—i.e., that people and communities are able to “[form] the structure of [a] new society within the shell of the old” (IWW, n.d.). Building on topics covered in the previous two chapters, including the potential for agroecology to converge as a practice, science and movement in Canada, and the need for the institutionalization of food

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\(^{72}\) *Formação* (or ‘formation’) is very much in line with praxis, although the latter can take on broader meanings.

\(^{73}\) For more information on the MST and its challenges and successes, see, e.g. Karriem 2013; Massicotte 2014; Rosset 2011; Wittman 2009; Wolford 2010.

\(^{74}\) Field notes, March 6-10, 2016.
sovereignty to overlap with alliance-building efforts, in this chapter I take up some of the important issues raised by Alison’s presentation on the MST’s six-week course.

I discuss Canadian farmers’ subjectivities in relation to capitalism, including their class consciousness, weighing the potential for an anticapitalist politics to translate in this context. I also draw on interview data and field observations to analyze the challenges that organic intellectuals within the NFU and Union Paysanne are facing in terms of both engaging with the state generally (in their struggles for food sovereignty), and adopting a prefigurative politics that can move beyond the margins of capitalist agriculture. I ultimately argue that a crucial tool for advancing food sovereignty in Canada will be political education. By this I mean educational activities that link everyday challenges with a critical view of systemic issues. Furthermore, these are activities that draw attention to the convergence and divergence of various social groups’ interests within the existing political economy. As I argue, political education in this context will need to be a pedagogy that brings farmers and non-farmer allies together, and I focus in particular on the need for strengthened rural-urban alliances. I also call for a pedagogy that is at once radical, based on a recognition of the need for system change, but that is also informed by the particularities of social struggles and specific initiatives that can be held up as alternative socio-economic arrangements in this capitalist setting.

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Education and unlearning among organic intellectuals

In recent years, many scholars have drawn attention to the connections between political education and struggles for food sovereignty (see, e.g., Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2014; Meek et al. 2017). Moving beyond concerns about the barriers to knowledge-sharing focused on agroecological
practices, which itself is an important political issue (see McCune et al. 2016; Rosset et al. 2011), this growing body of literature has analyzed the nature of Indigenous and peasant movements’ efforts to advance a radical pedagogy that situates problems evident in the corporate-dominated food system with capitalist structures and ongoing colonial processes. Examples of some of the movements analyzed in the literature include La Vía Campesina member organizations such as the MST (Barbosa 2016; Meek 2015b; Tarlau 2013, 2015), and smaller groups like the Peasants’ Movement of Papaye (MPP) in Haiti (Moore S. 2017), as well as the Zapatistas in Mexico (Baronnet 2008).

Although approaches are context-specific and varied, many of these movements have drawn inspiration from Paulo Freire’s methods and theories on critical pedagogy,

> by emphasizing education as a tool for developing critical consciousness and encouraging students to learn from their own reality, recognizing the power structures that shape their food environment, and focus on transforming the social and economic inequities in their communities. (Meek et al. 2017: 7).

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Gramsci (1971, 1992) was also very much interested in the overlapping of education, hegemony and social struggles. Having influenced Freire’s views on the politics of knowledge production, Gramsci observed that formal pedagogical methods and state-sponsored curricula were an important component of the societal structures that were buoying the ruling classes, while also seeing possibilities in alternative forms of education that could contribute significantly to anticapitalist struggles (see Allman 2002). In other words, he was convinced,

> at an early age, that the liberation of the subaltern classes required a massive educational effort—an effort that would somehow overcome the formidable obstacles posed by a state educational system that was designed to serve the rich and perpetuate their leading role in society. (Borg, Buttigieg and Mayo 2002: 4)

Evidently, the political challenges that come with advancing a critical (or radical) pedagogy in the contemporary capitalist context of Canada today are no less daunting than those faced in Gramsci’s time. In this light, political education is an important aspect of praxis—and both Gramsci and Freire
shared this focus on relationally advancing theory and action (Mayo 2015; cf. Allman 2002; McLaren et al. 2002). The task then is for organic intellectuals in Canada to collectively develop an understanding of the structural forces that are working against their interests, while also establishing strategies for transforming instances of ‘good sense’ into counterhegemonic practices. Naturally, these intellectuals must appreciate the ‘common sense’ that dominates in a society where critiques of capitalism will be marginalized, and find ways to foster an alternative culture, an alternative hegemony.

As noted by Edelman et al. (2014: 927), it may be

unreasonable for food sovereignty practitioners and scholars to assume the task of charting a global course through late capitalism, [but] none of us can escape the need for political reflection on the particular role of food sovereignty in pushing this transition in a post-capitalist direction. (Emphasis in original.)

Indeed, the wide range of socio-ecological issues discussed in Chapter 3 and 4 that are directly or indirectly related to the food system points to the importance of food sovereignty struggles as a component of a war of position. As part of this, beyond the political education of existing and potential organic intellectuals, there will need to be accompanying processes of unlearning. Radical pedagogy is very much about developing a critical awareness of the common-sense, hegemonic lessons that have been instilled in people, and this includes beginning to question notions that ‘modern’ agriculture is feeding the world, that agroecological systems would be too inefficient to replace industrial food production, and, more generally, that ‘there is no alternative’ to global capitalism.

Importantly, developing a ‘good sense’ in relation to food sovereignty will entail combatting commodity fetishism. As suggested in Chapter 2, commodity fetishism in relation to food is
particularly problematic in a country like Canada because demographically there are so few farmers left; and it is thus common for both urban and rural consumers to see food as a commodity that comes from grocery stores, without any substantive understanding of the labour processes, social relations, and other socio-ecological relations and processes that comprise its production (Marx 1977: 163-177). As I discuss in more detail below, critical pedagogy is therefore a theme that is not only related to social divisions between farmers and non-farmers, but also to urban-rural geographies and different subjectivities about the role of government and the functioning of the capitalist system itself. As Raymond Williams noted, the development of capitalism in urban and rural areas need to be seen as relational, as do the collectively developed alternatives that will challenge the existing system: “Neither will the city save the country nor the country the city. Rather the long struggle within both will become a general struggle, as in a sense it has always been” (1973: 301).

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5.2 - Capitalist farmers and best efforts to be otherwise

As I carried out my fieldwork, in considering the translatability of anticapitalist politics in the Canadian context, I sought to find both evidence of sympathetic perspectives on the matter as well as examples of the hegemonic challenges that would impede the advancement of these politics. In this section, I begin with an overview of findings that suggest that many NFU and Union Paysanne farmers are indeed open to critiquing capitalism, and to working toward alternative economic models, and I then proceed to discuss the dominant view, which is much more restrained in this regard.
**There is an alternative?**

As suggested above, throughout most of my research, the mere mention of the word ‘capitalism’ caught my attention, as this was a rare phenomenon. However, the NFU youth retreats that I attended were not the only occasions wherein the political-economic system in which Canadians are embedded was identified by name. For example, the former NFU president, Jan Slomp, was one person who was willing to utter the ‘C-word.’ During his opening address at the 2015 national convention he critically discussed how often the newly elected Liberal government focused on the concerns of the middle class during the election campaign, noting that if there is a middle class then this also means there is a lower class, “…And the values of the NFU reflect a desire to have no classes,” he stated. Slomp then highlighted how important cooperation has been throughout the NFU’s history, stressing that equality was a significant part of the vision of rural social movements on the prairies in the mid-twentieth century. He also referenced Brewster Kneen’s (2014) book, *Journey of an Unrepentant Socialist*, lamenting how the vision behind utopian movements can be compromised by “pragmatic” decision-making and by people’s willingness to negotiate within the confines of “unfettered capitalism.” Although this mention of capitalism was qualified by the adjective ‘unfettered,’ on the whole the address was notable in terms of its discussion of structural issues and class politics, and this was not the only time that Slomp made such statements in public fora.

At Union Paysanne meetings, I also heard capitalism critiqued outright, even if this was not a regular occurrence. At the organization’s 2016 congress, for example, one speaker identified himself as an anarchist during a presentation, while another participant suggested to me privately that some

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75 Field notes, Nov. 26, 2015. This quote is paraphrased.
members feel that Union Paysanne should go further to embrace anticapitalist politics. Other members of the organization stated in interviews that they identify with such politics, and one farmer (a notable organic intellectual) in fact stated that he initially joined Union Paysanne primarily because it is connected with La Vía Campesina, and is therefore associated with analyses of systemic issues and critiques of capitalism. In his words, “People here [in Quebec] have a really hard time grasping the fact … that [achieving] agroecology is inevitably going to come through putting an end to the global capitalist regime” (Interview, Aug. 24, 2015). Another Union Paysanne member indicated that she feels the organization’s international committee is more likely to take up these conversations than the organization at large (Interview, June 8, 2016), and, indeed, this committee and its coordinator recently published an opinion piece that linked the corporate appropriation of organic agriculture to problems within capitalism itself (Leblanc 2018a, 2018b).

The examples provided here are emblematic of the anticapitalist sentiments that I occasionally heard expressed by members of both the NFU and Union Paysanne, even if those discussions seemed to only take place in specific circumstances or circles. However, in relation to prefigurative politics and the development of alternatives, I also observed practical examples of farmers seeking to establish more equitable socio-economic arrangements that did not focus on profit maximization and the extraction of surplus value. This is not to say that these arrangements were not constrained by or embedded within the broader capitalist paradigm, but they demonstrated an interest in eschewing the traditional socio-ecological exploitation that is inherent in capitalist production and commodity circulation.

For example, several farmers that I met have implemented sliding-scale models within their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs. This typically involves some CSA members voluntarily paying slightly higher prices for their share of vegetables or meat so that others can receive food from the farmer at a discounted rate (or for free). One farmer near Kingston, Ontario, reported that their vegetable CSA program, which had approximately 150 members, was able to have 12 families participate because of the sliding scale, whereas they would otherwise not be able to afford to (Interview, Jan. 27, 2016). Another farmer in Outaouais, Quebec, indicated that they had 5 of their members’ vegetable CSA shares paid for by the other 70 members in the program (Interview, June 3, 2016). Some of these farmers that do direct marketing also partner with community food centres and social-justice oriented food organizations to provide shares for free. The fact that these economic arrangements are markedly different from typical capitalist relations of exchange was captured by one farmer when she said, “And it really blows people’s minds [when they are introduced to these sliding-scale programs]: ‘You mean, we have to decide what we’re going to pay per package of ground beef? Oh boy!'” (Interview, Jan. 27, 2016).

Other farmers indicated that they deliberately prioritize ecological concerns, including biodiversity on their farms, over financial concerns. When asked about these themes, one farmer from Montérégie, Quebec, stated, “To attain food sovereignty it will be necessary to have many small farms that are diversified, so that means farms that do not necessarily correspond with the capitalist model,” and, his spouse continued in this vein:

To be diversified it’s necessary to have parts [of your production] that are less profitable, and parts that are more profitable. We can talk about vegetables that are more profitable and those that are less profitable… But if you want to maintain diversity then you have to keep the less profitable vegetables and the more profitable ones. If I only want to be profitable then I'll only produce vegetables that are profitable. (Interview, Oct. 18, 2015)
This statement was significant given that I also came across many small-scale farmers who were engaging in ecological production practices, but certainly specializing, relatively speaking, in specific crops (such as salad greens) because they are more lucrative. Also on the theme of biodiversity and profitability, a grain farmer from eastern Ontario stated that he aims to grow an ecosystem where you “feed everybody,” adding that he does not mind losing $300 worth of grain to turkeys, or losing potatoes to rose-breasted grosbeaks, because they are part of a food chain that will mean their farm does not need to employ pesticides, and that their soils are healthy, fertile and able to sequester carbon; “I’m giving up $6,000 a year in hay, so the birds can have their kids,” he noted (Interview, May 29, 2016).

Another theme that arose in interviews on the topic of food sovereignty and capitalism was land. As one Union Paysanne member expressed, farmers “capitalize” through landownership, as the value of land is perpetually increasing and farmers are motivated to accumulate land both because of its value as an asset and because their machinery typically warrants it. He noted though, that

this form of capitalization through land is much less prominent on small-scale farms. Small farms are small in terms of land area. If Union Paysanne is promoting the model of small, family farms they’re effectively farms with less capital in the bank, or in land. So to answer your question, ‘Is food sovereignty in line with anticapitalism?’ …I think the answer is ‘yes’. (Interview, Oct. 18, 2015)

This quote is particularly telling coming from this farmer, given that their farm was an example of a successfully organized land trust. After approximately eight years’ worth of work gathering financial contributions and completing necessary administrative duties, the land trust was established in 2010, which means that the farm operators do not own the land, and the trust must maintain the land as an organic or biodynamic farm in perpetuity.\(^7\) In another case, a young farmer from Outaouais also

\(^7\) Field notes, Oct. 7-18, 2015. Land trusts may not be the best or the only approach to alternative land relations, but they at least get away from the individual private property ownership model that lends itself to financial speculation and the treatment of land as an investment vehicle.
suggested in an interview that moving away from individual private landownership would be a key way to encourage more people to access land and engage in ecological agriculture: “[Existing laws] impede land redistribution. So, I think we need a policy that would not only improve land access but that would nationalize, if you’d like, arable land. I think that would really help; a policy wherein topsoil is viewed as a public good” (Interview, Sept. 12, 2015). These examples are notable given the close connections between capitalist development and individualized private landownership, as well as the fact that many farmers see environmental stewardship as being directly tied to a need to privately own a given property (Desmarais et al. 2015; Henderson 1998; Kepkiewicz and Dale 2018). As discussed in Chapter 2, private landownership is also central to farmers’ efforts to maintain some control over the means of production in agriculture—efforts, even if transitory in nature, that may help them remain independent, or petty, commodity producers (Kloppenburg 2004: Ch. 2).

Generally speaking, I have outlined a few key themes that arose through my research that demonstrated possible inroads to anticapitalist subjectivities; however, there was in fact quite a bit of evidence on display that many ecological farmers are not focusing narrowly on profit maximization and capital accumulation in their operations. For example, several individuals I encountered left well-paying jobs to either return to their family’s farm or to enter into the sector—a move that may demand a degree of privilege, but which also demonstrates a desire to prioritize counterhegemonic socio-ecological ideals. Other farmers variously expressed that they want to pay workers as well as their business will allow, which sometimes occurs through formally organized cooperative models. “How can we avoid replicating capitalist relations when it comes to farm labour?” one woman asked at an event, while others indicated in conversations that they hope to counter the trend of agricultural workers being exploited in Canada. In sum, there is certainly a degree of ‘good sense’

78 Field notes, March 6-10, 2016. This quote is paraphrased.
evident among members of the NFU and Union Paysanne, particularly among identifiable organic intellectuals, however it was clear overall that ‘common sense’ runs deep within these organizations.

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_Easier to imagine the end of the world…_

The clearest counterpoint to the above-mentioned examples of overt and implicit anticapitalist sentiments came through interview responses. I consistently asked respondents about the suggestion periodically put forward by La Vía Campesina and some of its member organizations that food sovereignty, and effective responses to climate change, are not compatible with capitalism. Often interviewees would add a qualifier to describe the variant of capitalism that is dominant, implying or directly asserting that we should be striving for another (kinder, gentler) form of capitalism. For example, in the words of a livestock farmer from the Ottawa area:

> It’s tough because, I know …our country has been moving more towards _direct_ capitalism, which tends to lead to oligarchy, which is certainly incompatible with food sovereignty. But, if you look at places… that are democratic and capitalistic, but a little more socialistic I suppose at the same time—that mesh the systems a little bit better, like in Scandinavia—you know, I don’t know that it’s one hundred percent incompatible. I think that …maybe some compromise would be necessary… (Interview, Sept. 23, 2015; emphasis added)

In recognition of the dominant hegemony at play then, farmers’ perspectives such as this are in line with a commonly held view that recent crises of capitalism have been caused by a failure to adhere to Keynesian or welfare-state capitalism (Mann G. 2017). Other interviewees variously critiqued “exploitative and extractive capitalism” (Interview, Dec. 22, 2016), or “reckless capitalism” (Interview, Dec. 2, 2016), while some of them expressed a nostalgia for a capitalism of yesteryear: “There was a time when capitalism was about always doing better, because that’s what paid off—to always do
better. Now it’s about always making more. It’s very different, you know?” remarked one vegetable farmer from Outaouais, Quebec (Interview, Sept. 9, 2015).

On the same theme, noting that the anticapitalist movement is marginal in Quebec, and that Union Paysanne is always striving to attract more members, one young woman involved with the organization stated, “A lot of farmers are against, say, free-trade deals and all that. Neoliberalism, you can talk to them about; it’s something that people can understand… something that threatens supply management. So …you can take up anti-neoliberal discourses …but anticapitalism, in general, no…” (Interview, June 8, 2016). Similarly, a young organic intellectual who is active within the NFU observed that, “People can get on board with describing something as ‘corporate control,’ because it’s like ‘evil corporations’ [are responsible]… but describing something as challenging the fundamental system of our society is more difficult for people to wrap their heads around, and too challenging for people, I guess. I don’t know” (Interview, May 28, 2016).

Similarly, many farmers I spoke with seemed comfortable with the notion of ‘system change’ in general, apparently agreeing that substantial societal reforms will be necessary in order to deal with problems in our food system and with climate change; however, they seldom automatically associated the ‘system’ in ‘system change’ with capitalism. This is worth highlighting given that, according to one NFU associate member who is actively involved with La Vía Campesina, discourses around system change in those international circles are not being “watered down,” as they are consistently associated with critiques of capitalism and with non-capitalist solutions to dealing with climate change, for example. Some farmers I interviewed, however, were somewhat surprised when I followed up a question about ‘system change’ with an explicit inquiry about their

thoughts on the need to confront the capitalist system specifically. As one vegetable farmer from Quebec stated:

Now *that* [replacing capitalism] is a systemic change! [Laughing] That’s for sure. But which [system] would we take up? Because... It was Churchill who said [in talking about] democracy, but we can apply it to capitalism: ‘Capitalism is the worst of systems, except for all the others [that have been tried]’ [Laughing]. (Interview, June 1, 2016)

Again, this farmer then alluded to the Scandinavian model as an example of one that is more ‘humane’ even though it is capitalistic, and his spouse added, “Yes. We don’t want to go towards communism, where everyone is equal. That doesn’t interest me. …We don’t want to have line-ups at the store…” (Interview, June 1, 2016).

Echoing sentiments reminiscent of McCarthyism, there were in fact several farmers who equated critiques of capitalism with support for communism. In the words of one farmer from Huron County, Ontario:

The problem is, if you say ‘I’m against capitalism,’ you become a communist. I’m against corporate super-power, and one—no, zero point zero something—percent owning everything... So, actually, we …need to change the discourse, and we need to control the 0.01%, and we need to find a way to communicate the new capitalism, but we don’t have to become communists. Like, I’m not a communist. (Interview, Dec. 2, 2016)

While not every interviewee indicated that they saw systemic choices as a dichotomy between capitalism and communism, there was evidence in many responses of imagination being stifled by the common sense, post-political notion that there is no alternative to capitalism. Indeed, it is worth recalling Jameson’s (2003: 76) quote, “Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism,” especially given that several people with whom I spoke suggested that it would take a crisis to drive any substantial response to the existing food-climate paradigm. I did not expect apocalyptic imagery to emerge during interviews, but indeed such responses came from both farmers who seemed to be sympathetic to anticapitalist critiques and
those who felt capitalism could be “modified to include some regard for the environment,” as one Ontario grain and vegetable farmer put it (Interview, Dec. 16, 2015).

For example, when asked about the suggestion that profound systemic changes will be needed in order for food sovereignty to be realized, one dairy farmer involved with the NFU responded that, “Well, I would say on my pessimistic days, I feel like it’s going to take a crisis to make people change. …The whole issue of climate change may have its consequences that will change the way we look at agriculture on a global scale” (Interview, Jan. 27, 2016). On this theme, in reference to strategies to deal with climate change, one vegetable farmer from Quebec stated, “The more that there are effects, the more …impetus there is for people to move. When it hits you, when you’re directly impacted… then all of a sudden you start understanding the problem a bit better. Yeah. I mean, that’s not a strategy obviously [laughing] …It’s not something I’m hoping for either!” (Interview, June 3, 2016). To this, his spouse added:

Our strategy is being super close to the apocalypse, then people will start doing something [Laughing] …Yeah, I find that until something really dramatic or drastic happens, people generally go to that limit, right? You’re just waiting until like… Ooh, your last cigarette you’ll smoke and [then]… ah, finally you have cancer, right? But I think in order for change [to occur], people need, like, a slap on the face. They need a drought in California where nobody can eat, or something really dramatic where you’re like, “Wait a minute. We need to…” You know? (Interview, June 3, 2016)

Although there was laughter throughout this segment of the interview, it was clear that this farming couple sincerely felt that crisis would be a key driver of the kinds of profound changes that would improve the food system and society more broadly. There were in fact several references in interviews to this line of thinking, with one Union Paysanne member referring to an energy crisis, such as that which happened in Cuba after the fall of the Soviet Union, as the kind of incident that would instigate a shift away from industrial agriculture (Interview, July 21, 2015).
As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, apocalyptic discourses can be a concomitant feature of apolitical responses to climate change and other systemic problems. It is notable, therefore, that these themes emerged, and that they were nearly as consistent as farmers’ hesitancy to critique capitalism outright. In the next section, I discuss the implications of these findings, particularly in association with political strategies for moving forward.

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5.3 - Food sovereignty is not a political program: Engaging with the state

Farmers’ sentiments that suggest it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism raise important questions about the conditions of possibility for a counterhegemonic war of position in the current political-economic context. In this section, I therefore reflect on these matters and draw on additional findings to explore, firstly, how organic intellectuals and other members of the National Farmers Union and Union Paysanne may be able to effectively engage with the state; secondly, how class identities and class politics are important considerations with regard to the potential to establish a counterhegemony that would transform political society; and, thirdly, how alliances between farmers and non-farmers may correlate with such struggles.

Looking for a handout?

As discussed in Chapter 4, both the NFU and Union Paysanne are engaging in efforts to institutionalize food sovereignty. However the political-economic realities of these efforts suggest that capitalism, and not just the corporate food regime, will constantly limit genuine forms of agroecology and food sovereignty, including through processes of commodification and co-optation. To confront these realities it is therefore worth considering a position that Bernstein (2014) asserts:
that food sovereignty is a political project, but not a political program. This is indeed true. As suggested in the previous chapter, food sovereignty and agroecology can effectively be theoretically and practically integrated with a wide range of social struggles in the Canadian context, however these concepts do not encapsulate a program that can serve as an intellectual and motivational compass for a broad, counterhegemonic movement. The war of position, as Gramsci (1971, 1992) saw it, was at once a cultural struggle and a political-economic struggle, but the ultimate goal in his view was to replace the ruling elites holding power with a party that would serve the interests of the subaltern—the working classes and peasants. The party he felt would be best poised to do so in the context of 1920s and 1930s Italy was the Communist Party (PCI)—the ‘modern prince’ as he referred to it in his notebooks (ibid.).

As revealed above, Canadian farmers are evidently far from embracing communism as a political program to which they would subscribe, which raises questions about the translatability of any anticapitalist program in the current cultural moment (from anarchism to socialism). There are, of course, practical realities to acknowledge as well in this conjuncture. The NFU and Union Paysanne periodically lobby government officials, regardless of which party is in power, as part of a tactical approach to institutionalize food sovereignty through legislative means (Interviews, May 28, 2016; Nov. 9, 2016). Taking a radical or confrontational approach, therefore, would be unlikely to curry favour with elected officials and advance these organizations’ policy agendas. As noted by one Ontario farmer who is involved with the NFU’s organizing work:

There are political reasons people don’t want to critique capitalism because, if you’re lobbying the government and you say, “You shouldn’t do this trade deal because this is a bad deal for Canadians,” then the government’s like, “Oh, tell me a little bit more about that.” But if you say, “You shouldn’t do this trade deal because your fundamental economic system

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80 Gramsci used the term ‘modern prince’ both in order to avoid the scrutiny of prison censors and to refer back to Machiavelli’s sixteenth-century work of political philosophy, The Prince, as he discussed the potential for unifying social groups through the kinds of collective action that would bring about a successful war of position.
of capitalism is unjust and should be overthrown,” then they’re like, “Okay, next!” [Laughing]
You know? And so the NFU has that role a lot of the time, and so it complicates it when it
wants to take really radical perspectives. (Interview, May 26, 2016)

This quote effectively summarizes a crucial tactical reason to not employ anticapitalist rhetoric when
engaging members of political society, however—following Bernstein (2014) again—it is also
important to grapple with the strategic challenges that come with efforts to align food sovereignty
with a radical political program. Simply put, many farmers would not prioritize strategies that would
involve looking to the government to create social change. Even though the NFU and Union
Paysanne interact with the federal and provincial governments as organizations, my field research
revealed that many of their members are more libertarian in their political leanings, demonstrating an
emphasis on individual responsibility and autonomy, and a scepticism toward state power. For
example, at the NFU’s national convention in 2015 during a debate on a resolution that would have
the organization seek financial support from the government to assist with building fences for
pastures, the response of one member was particularly telling: “I need toilet paper too,” he said,
while speaking against the resolution, “… Should I ask the government to buy me toilet paper?”

Similar sentiments, expressed by a vegetable farmer from Quebec, are worth quoting at length:

I’m not a big fan of expecting results to come, or change to come, through politics. …I’m a
big fan of… consumer awareness. …I think people need to be educated. I don’t think we’re
going to legislate our way out of problems… Honestly, the more I’m into this, the more firm
I am in that belief, and the more disappointed I am in how that is the first goddamn thing
that comes out of everyone’s mouth. …Like, …we [have] become more and more active in
community groups, and you know, I give it a swing—I go to [events and meetings]—and
every time I get there whatever change it is we’re looking to do… everyone’s always trying to
figure out a way to have their hand out, and how the government should be helping us for
something instead of doing things themselves. I find that very disappointing, and I also find
that to be a main cause for the inaction that happens and how we don’t improve situations,
because everyone’s first instinct is to put their hand out for… “how this should be
subsidized” or “we should be able to get that” or “they should make this a law” …when it’s

81 Field notes, Nov. 25-28, 2015. Quote is paraphrased.
…not about laws; it’s about choices—and people can’t make choices if they’re not informed.
(Interview, June 3, 2016)

There are two points worth noting about statements such as these, which I heard from both NFU and Union Paysanne members. The first is that there is a tendency to treat community-based or individual initiatives and efforts to institutionalize food sovereignty as mutually exclusive. In this light, any form of prefigurative politics would appear to preclude government engagement. The second point is that education is seen as an important lever for driving social change, however it is associated with individualism and consumer choice. This is in line with the common sense notion prevalent under neoliberal capitalism that change should primarily come through individualistic behavioural changes and enlightened shopping habits.

I do not mean to suggest, however, that I did not also hear from many organic intellectuals within the NFU and Union Paysanne who agree with the strategic approach to engage government as a means of advancing social change. When I asked farmers about ways that food sovereignty and a climate-friendly agricultural model may be advanced in Canada, several of them favoured policy-oriented and legislative approaches, variously referring to governmental interventions—from municipal planning to provincial laws and the federal *Growing Forward* policy framework—that could be leveraged or improved upon. A grain farmer from Ontario was in fact very much in favour of alternative forms of state intervention:

It’s got to start at the government level. I think it has to be tied integrally with GDP. I think we need to redefine GDP [so] that damage is subtracted from goods. We need to have positive goods and services, and negative subtraction of goods and services. So, if you produce $50,000 worth of wheat and you inject $8,000 worth of herbicides on there… that’s got to be subtracted, because you’ve now harmed the environment, and it will have negative effects for 6, 8, 12, 15 years… So one is to redefine the concept of GDP and start adding to the price of food the equal and opposite cost of the negative effects to the environmental “sustainability.”

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Two is to integrally tie health care to this… and the best way to fund that is… We tax what we want and we don’t tax what we don’t want. …We need an inversely correlated health care tax. So, organic broccoli: 0% tax; Hostess Twinkie: 700% tax… A Twinkie should be $7.00; soft drinks, 5 bucks; a glass of organic juice, $1.12. And that money …it will only carry a deficit for two to three years. And all of a sudden all your fuckin’ diabetes will disappear, your hospital wards will be empty, [and] your cancer rates will start tanking. (Interview, May 29, 2016)

The challenge, it seems, will be for this kind of imaginative thinking to permeate throughout the NFU and Union Paysanne. The task of organic intellectuals within both organizations will therefore be to contribute to an internal educational effort that establishes government as a potential positive source of social change, while also acknowledging the constraints political society necessarily faces within a capitalist political economy. To be sure, these organic intellectuals are already embarking on such endeavours, striving to effectively engage the government in various contexts. One hurdle that must be overcome though is that “the state” can seem so abstract, and policy efforts and advocacy typically target a single department or agency within larger bureaucratic apparatuses that are incredibly siloed, separated by focus and by geographical jurisdiction (see MacRae 2011). Thus, on top of countering a lack of political imagination that fails to see alternatives to capitalism, these intellectuals will need to further support their fellow farmers in generally understanding the state as a worthwhile target within food sovereignty struggles, and in specifically imagining strategies for particular interventions.

As part of their pedagogical efforts, it will also behoove organic intellectuals to grapple with the reasons that many people are sceptical toward political power and institutional change. One such reason is that governmental bureaucracy runs the risk of slowing down social change and inhibiting innovation at the community level. In reference to ecological agriculture, for example, during field research I heard several farmers suggest that the administrative processes involved with maintaining
organic certification can be cumbersome and dampen innovation.\(^83\) One Ontario farmer made a similar observation when she stated, “In a lot ways, the regulations that are in place, [such as] small-scale abattoirs …being held to the same standard of regulatory expectation[s] as the federal plants, …actually get in the way of allowing …ecological-scale [farming] to function. …And so there’s a need for [regulations] to get …out of the way” (Interview, Dec. 2, 2016).

On this same theme, another NFU member brainstormed a wide range of policies that could be implemented or changed in order to bring about a more agroecological food system, but he then went on to say:

I was kind of listing government things that could happen… but I mean, realistically, I think a lot more things could happen at the community level because governments …often obstruct positive change, right? We like to fantasize sometimes about all the great things they could do, but in practice they have many problems, and we can often find models at the community level that other people can imitate. (Interview, May 26, 2016)

This farmer then referenced the allegory of the cathedral and the bazaar that has been discussed in terms of software development (see Raymond 2001). According to the metaphor, the cathedral represents a centralized, bureaucratic, and formal system of solving problems, whereas the bazaar is a more decentralized and autonomous ‘cloud’ approach, wherein people experiment and innovate more independently. Communities, this farmer suggested, can often be more agile in developing solutions, “…and hopefully, eventually, governments can be dragged around to supporting some of these ideas” (Interview, May 26, 2016). This is an important consideration for organic intellectuals to wrestle with, given that the risk posed by a sluggish bureaucracy is certainly not limited to governments in a capitalist economy (Strønen 2017), and, in addition, there is a need for praxis to effectively inform the balancing of prefigurative politics and institutional politics.

\(^83\) Field notes, Dec. 3-5, 2015; and Nov. 30-Dec. 2, 2016.
A second reason that people may be sceptical toward strategically engaging with the state has to do with the fact that governments can be corrupted—yet another prospect that is not limited to capitalism. In North America it is common for observers to document the extent to which governments at various levels are in the throes of corporate control, with democracy effectively having been replaced by ‘corporatocracy’ (Perkins 2008). These trends are certainly worthy of concern, particularly for organic intellectuals striving to strategically engage the state to create social change. However, given that elites can also manipulate political society in non-capitalist political economies, a critical pedagogy that would promote government engagement as a means to advance food sovereignty and other political goals will certainly need to understand these realities. Practically speaking, it therefore makes sense for organic intellectuals to connect a political education centred on strategies to engage the state with an analysis of class interests and of the kinds of ongoing negotiations that would necessarily take place within a new historic bloc.

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Class Action

At a national NFU convention in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, I acquired a button that featured the NFU logo and that read ‘Support the CLASS ACTION!’ I could tell that this button was something of a relic given that the logo on it had long been replaced by a more modern design, and it was clear that this slogan was likely referring to a class action lawsuit in which the NFU had engaged against CP and CN railways in 1979 (NFU 2009: 10). I nevertheless asked myself whether the slogan was also indicative of the organization formerly being more attentive to class politics. In Gramsci’s view, taking power at the level of the state would first entail uniting subaltern groups within society based on shared class interests. As suggested in the previous chapter, there are diverse groups—from
Indigenous peoples to racialized workers in the food system and low-income people generally—that would benefit from the realization of a political program based on food sovereignty. However, class politics and the identification of shared interests is a complicated matter, both in terms of Canadian farmers’ subjectivities and urban-rural relations.

To begin with the topic of farmers’ subjectivities toward class politics, it is worth recalling scholars’ observations that this is a key theoretical and practical tension within the food sovereignty movement globally (Bernstein 2010; Edelman et al. 2014). Within La Vía Campesina, for example, there are constant challenges that come with building consensus among the network’s disparate groups of peasants, Indigenous peoples, and relatively wealthy farmers in industrialized capitalist countries (Desmarais 2007; Patel 2010). To draw on Bernstein (2010), within the Canadian context alone it is worth analyzing ‘family’ farmers’ positionalities in relation to the broader political economy, given that these will be different depending on whether a given farm is worked by a family, directly managed by a family, or simply owned by a family. As mentioned in Chapter 4, although NFU and Union Paysanne members are generally disadvantaged by agricultural policies and by power disparities within the corporate food regime (as discussed in Chapter 4), it would be inaccurate to describe them as ‘subaltern’. Many are clearly struggling to make a substantial annual income, yet farmers who own land and other assets are building equity over time, just as off-farm employment or savings from previous jobs (for recent entrants into farming) can provide them with relative financial security.\footnote{As noted in a previous footnote, farmers’ inherited wealth can also be part of this equation.} Some farmers I spoke with were clearly aware of their relative privilege, expressing concern for the structural barriers that prevent many from participating in ecological agricultural, or benefiting from it as consumers (Interviews May 28, 2016; Dec. 22, 2016); however, I
generally did not observe a consistent awareness of class politics among NFU and Union Paysanne members.

For example, at a workshop at the NFU’s 2015 national convention in London, Ontario, one member stressed that the NFU is not a ‘left’ or a ‘right’ organization, but rather one that “speaks truth to corporations.”85 Similarly, as one farmer observed, “[While] the NFU has a higher proportion of people who would be sympathetic to—I don’t know—‘soft socialism’ or something like that… there are …probably more people who would say, ‘Oh, well we should get rid of the ‘union’ in the name because, you know, we don’t want to be associated with unions’” (Interview, May 26, 2016). Sentiments such as these point to a lack of appreciation for the connections between class interests and historical and contemporary instances of collective organizing in Canada. The NFU, of course, is not a formal labour union in the traditional sense, however there was certainly at one time more of a class-oriented culture within the organization, as demonstrated by its former motto (no longer in use), ‘In Union is Strength’ and by its members’ approaches to organizing both before and following its founding in 1969 (Dodds and Forsey 2009; NFU 2009).86 In contrast, its members today are more likely to see themselves as entrepreneurs or as business owners, even if this language makes some farmers uncomfortable (Interview Dec. 21, 2016).87 As with Union Paysanne members, many farmers within the NFU strive to be as profitable as possible in their operations, while celebrating those ‘rock star’ farmers who have been able to make six-figure incomes through ecological agriculture and, sometimes, publish books documenting their path to success (Fortier 2014; cf. Hartman 2015; Salatin 2017).

85 Field notes, Nov. 25-28, 2015.
86 The NFU’s current motto is “Strong Communities. Sound Policies. Sustainable Farms.”
87 Also, Field notes, Jan. 28-31, 2016; and Nov. 24-26, 2016.
To be clear, I do not mean to begrudge Canadian farmers for wanting to have a comfortable lifestyle. I was very sympathetic toward farmers I met who wanted to make money to invest in various kinds of infrastructure on their farms (Interview, May 29, 2016); to ensure that their children have new shoes when they need them (Field Notes, June 6-7, 2016); or to take a vacation periodically (Field notes, Jan. 28-31, 2016). Farmers did not define the political-economic parameters that compel them to engage in the *business* of farming, and the selling of food through capitalist markets. From a class awareness perspective, however, if relatively privileged farmers focus solely on the ways that they are struggling then they run the risk of failing to identify potential allies as they work to establish a political program based on food sovereignty, including the farm workers and others who are less advantaged in the food system. The whole issue of agricultural labour is out of scope for a detailed discussion here, however, it must be noted that a class politics associated with advancing food sovereignty in Canada will certainly need to address the exceptionalism in agricultural labour that facilitates the exploitation of both domestic and migrant farm workers (Ekers et al. 2016; Reid-Musson 2017; Weiler, Otero and Wittman 2016). More broadly, as noted in Chapter 4, this will entail working toward a ‘just transition’ in agriculture. In addition, a class analysis must also come to grips with the long-standing question of how to ensure that food produced according to ecological standards, respect for animal welfare, and just labour practices is not only available to middle- and upper-class people who can afford the higher prices typically associated with such food (Goodman, DuPuis and Goodman 2012; Guthman 2008a, 2008b).

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‘Eaters’ are Voters

On top of labour issues then, it is also important to consider farmer-non-farmer relations with respect to a politics of articulation that would lead to alliances for a political program based on food sovereignty. Given that farmers constitute less than one percent of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada 2017b), and that agricultural labourers (many of whom are not citizens) do not expand this number significantly (Statistics Canada 2016c), the demographic realities alone compel farm organizations to look to non-farmers to support food system transformation. This also has to do with approaches to engaging with the state therefore, as there are political consequences to the fact that there are very few farmers in Canada. As one organic intellectual within the NFU noted at a national convention, in her experience meeting with politicians on Parliament Hill to draw attention to specific food and agricultural issues, the elected officials that she and others were lobbying were clear that they care about these issues because urban voters are increasingly paying attention to such matters. To elaborate, in the words of that same farmer:

I think [the] kind of approach [that involves focusing more on public outreach] can be more effective than just …direct[ly] lobbying government… Because government responds to what voters want, and if the NFU is pushing for something and it seems like it’s just coming from the NFU …nobody in government cares about that. […]But[,] if you can reach a broader base in cities… which is where the voters are, then all of a sudden they listen… And that’s when change might come—when [politicians] feel like there’s a large enough mass to be worth mobilizing because they’ll get votes if they do it. (Interview, May 28, 2016)

This was not the only farmer who pointed to the political sensibility of engaging with non-farmers because ‘eaters’ are voters. ‘Eaters’ is a term that many (anglophone) farmers use to refer to non-farmers as a means to avoid simply framing them as consumers. Of course, farmers must eat as well, and there are many non-farmers in rural areas, therefore the point here is not to establish these categories dichotomously. However, it is also politically astute to recognize that the vast majority of

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88 There are 280,315 paid agricultural workers in Canada as of 2016, including 79,273 family members of farm operators.
89 Field notes, Nov. 24–26, 2016.
Canadians (83 percent) are living in cities (Statistics Canada 2017a), and very few of these are involved in urban food production.

Organic intellectuals within the NFU and Union Paysanne are therefore tasked with fostering a class politics that will not only bring together ostensibly diverse groups of farmers and agricultural workers, but also contribute to the articulation of farmers and non-farmers. As Williams (1973) observed, capitalism may have developed differently in city and country, but there are many reasons to focus on the commonalities in terms of who is being advantaged and disadvantaged within capitalism. Bridging the perceived gap between urban and rural areas or issues, will in fact be central to food sovereignty struggles in Canada, as well as efforts to establish a counterhegemonic political program. A central part of this work will involve dismantling the stereotypes, assumptions and cultural biases that may inhibit urban and rural people’s understanding of each other’s realities. For example, city dwellers may hold romantic notions of bucolic rural landscapes and hardworking farm families, but in practice farming has been severely marginalized from a cultural standpoint. As a young woman and aspiring farmer involved with Union Paysanne expressed, “It’s crazy how devalued farming has become… Agriculture is dying as a profession and [it’s] no wonder: it’s not valued economically—it’s so hard to make a living—but also it’s not valued socially. And we need to change that narrative” (Interview Nov. 26, 2016).

Similarly, farmers sometimes hold non-farmers in low esteem. One Quebecois vegetable grower I met was frustrated by some farmers-market customers who appeared to demonstrate an ignorance about food production, such as one person who was put off by purple and yellow (heirloom) varieties of carrots and who asked instead for ‘normal-looking’ carrots. More commonly, farmers I

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90 Field notes, Sept. 1–12, 2015.
met were disappointed by non-farmers’ arguably misinformed perspectives on meat production. As discussed in Chapter 3, some of this has to do with the narrative that veganism is a cure-all for problems in the food system—a perspective that does not consider the importance of animals within agroecological production systems. Generally speaking, one NFU member and livestock farmer from eastern Ontario stated:

I think there’s a big disconnect actually [in terms of people’s knowledge of where their food comes from], and the more time I spend on the farm, out in the country, the more I realize it. …I’ve heard more and more in the last year …the term ‘citiot’ …the combination of ‘city’ [and] ‘idiot’… which is sad, right? …And I know for sure that [for] the farmers I’ve heard make those comments about city people, it’s done out of frustration; it’s not done out of malice. …You just get really tired of having to defend yourself all the time. (Interview Sept. 23, 2015)

This farmer mentioned that tensions not only arise around meat production, but also with regard to agricultural programs that depend on public dollars. She nevertheless went on to suggest that there must be a way for farmers and non-farmers to “meet in the middle,” which speaks to the politics of articulation alluded to above. As I discuss in the next section, such a ‘meeting in the middle’ is not only important because ‘eaters are voters’ but also because it will be key to the building of a counterhegemonic movement and a prefigurative politics for food sovereignty. As I also discuss, political education may be the best route through which to bring these divergent groups together.

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5.4 - Toward a radical and grassroots pedagogy

From ‘real utopias’ to the war of position

Organic intellectuals striving to establish food sovereignty and a political program that would support it clearly have a significant task ahead of them. The political-economic challenges both
within the food system and within society more generally may very well seem insurmountable. However, there appear to be practical routes to establishing a counterhegemony that, arguably, is in fact already gaining momentum. As a starting point, it is encouraging that there are Canadian farmers who are either critiquing capitalism or demonstrating that their marketing practices can emphasize use values over exchange values. The above-mentioned examples—of sliding-scale CSA programs, land trusts, and growing practices that prioritize biodiversity over lucrativeness—are all evidence of a prefigurative approach to food production that does not centre on maximizing profit accumulation through exploitation and the extraction of surplus value. As noted though, these examples (and critiques of capitalism) are marginal within ecological farming circles and, especially, within the Canadian food system. Organic intellectuals within the NFU and Union Paysanne thus have a role to play in moving these instances of prefigurative politics out from the margins so that they become part of a ‘good sense’ of how the food system can be organized.

This will undoubtedly entail countering commodity fetishism within mainstream and alternative food economies. As one vegetable farmer from Outaouais, Quebec, indicated when I asked him about his impression of people’s awareness of the social and environmental impacts of agriculture, “I’m a little bit disillusioned with the general public as things stand, in the sense that, from what I understand people are just hungry… They just want to eat three times a day. They’re not too inclined to be asking themselves these questions” (Interview, Sept. 9, 2015). This speaks to how deeply entrenched commodity fetishism is with regard to food issues, yet even those people who are relatively knowledgeable about these issues often appear to be satisfied with the ‘vote with your fork’ approach to creating change (see Pollan 2006; and, for a contrasting perspective, Guthman 2007, 2008c). As a Union Paysanne member from Montérégie suggested to me, their customers seem to be motivated to buy organic and participate in a CSA either due to individual health concerns or to
broader concerns about agriculture’s environmental consequences; however, they can seem reluctant to move beyond modifying their consumption habits: “Often in talking with people, it can be difficult to get them to come to the farm,” she explained, “They’re still too much about ‘Me—What can I do personally?’… They’re still in their homes… Far from the farm. Sometimes I feel they’re so very far from the farm [laughing]” (Interview, Oct. 18, 2015).

A political education centred on food and agricultural issues can certainly help counteract these kinds of commodity fetishism. It will involve helping non-farmers to understand that eating ‘local’ does not necessarily reduce one’s cognitive distance from a farm, and that shopping ‘responsibly’ will never sufficiently address the profound socio-ecological injustices in the capitalist food system. As demonstrated by the MST’s approach to ‘formation’ (formação) in Brazil, an effective radical pedagogy takes learning out of the realm of consumerism and into the realm of practice and critical reflection (i.e. into the realm of praxis). By engaging in activities around social reproduction and food production, while also coming to grips with the systemic tendencies under capitalism that generate intractable problems, one can develop a clearer sense of both structural issues that must be addressed in order for food sovereignty to be actualized, as well as practical alternative socio-economic approaches that are already possible.

In Canada, it is clear that both farmers and non-farmers could benefit from this kind of political education. The examples of prefigurative approaches to food marketing and land relations can be promoted among farmers and non-farmers in the hopes of replicating them. These approaches need to be contextualized however, by situating them in relation to the capitalist system. Following Gibson-Graham (2006), an understanding of such economic arrangements can break down the essentializing view of capitalism as a monolithic totality that stands in binary opposition to
anticapitalism. The links need to be drawn however, in order for alternative approaches to be understood in terms of how they can exist in a capitalist economy and yet operate contrarily to capitalist relations. As one farmer expressed to me, most NFU members could benefit from an “education about what capitalism is and what capitalism means” (Interview, May 26, 2016), and the same seems to be true for Union Paysanne members. Without an awareness of the system’s inherent tendencies to rely on socio-ecological exploitation and appropriation as the means through which capital is accumulated, people will unsurprisingly continue to suggest that capitalism can be reformed—or that corporate control and wealth concentration are the root cause of contemporary problems, as opposed to the capitalist system itself. At the same time, as discussed in Chapter 2, it is important to take a nuanced view that appreciates that farming in Canada is largely about petty commodity production, which means it is integrated into capitalist relations and markets, but that—as a sector ‘centred in nature’ (Mann S. 1990)—it also holds particular potential for the development of non-capitalist alternatives.

The key challenge for organic intellectuals within the NFU and Union Paysanne will be to extend their political education beyond the food and agricultural sector. These organizations are already incorporating political education into their activities, such as through the NFU’s youth retreats and conventions, and through the agroecology workshops offered by the Centre Paysan. Many of these activities have been inspired and informed by interactions that members have had with La Vía Campesina peasants and activists at international events, as is demonstrated by grassroots approaches to horizontal learning that are making their way into both the NFU and Union Paysanne’s educational endeavours (Interview, Mar. 24, 2017). It is also encouraging that both organizations have been making concerted efforts to invite associate (non-farmer) members (or
'membres citoyens') into the fold, which helps to garner political support as well as counter commodity fetishism.

Nevertheless, once a critical mass of these organizations’ members develop an understanding of capitalism, it will be necessary to connect food sovereignty struggles—and prefigurative politics on farms—to broader counterhegemonic efforts. Organic intellectuals must stress that not only is a new food system needed, but a new society altogether. This can seem like a daunting task. As a young woman active within the NFU effectively articulated:

> When I’ve been to Via Campesina events and it’s like, “Okay we need to take down capitalism, and build this whole new agroecological system,” it’s like, “Okay, well, in the meantime I still need to pay my mortgage and bills and everything, so… How do you participate in the capitalist system and make a living but then also push for this longer-term shift?” …And I think people [will ask,] “Okay, I hear the principles of agroecology or food sovereignty and that sounds like a great idea, but …what is the process to replace capitalism with this new structure?” And …how do you move from it being a very niche thing for kind of hippie radical-type people, or wealthy people, to …supporting broader society? (Interview, May 28, 2016)

These are important questions to ask, as people sympathetic to anticapitalist sentiments will want to understand the alternatives that may be possible, especially given that the hegemonic context in which we are embedded does suggest that capitalism is an impenetrable totality.

In his writings on ‘real utopias,’ Erik Olin Wright (2010, 2015) has noted that people often seek out evidence of practical alternative socio-economic models given how spectacularly many grandiose, top-down plans to transform societies have failed (in both capitalist and socialist contexts). These alternative models can be institutional in nature, such as state-led universal basic income programs, or community-based, such as devolved and decentralized governance approaches (ibid.). The challenge for those taking up a radical pedagogy for food sovereignty will be to connect the prefigurative examples discussed above (or ‘food utopias’; see Stock, Carolan and Rosin 2015) with
more generalist efforts to transform society via a war of position. In other words, instances of food sovereignty and agroecology—from effective agricultural programs to innovative farming models—can serve as real utopias; however, it is important to remember that these concepts should be understood as processes rather than end goals. In this way, food sovereignty and agroecology are consistent with a utopianism of *process* rather than a utopianism of *form* (Harvey 1996). Proponents of these concepts can then expect to constantly work, on an ongoing basis, to see their radical aspirations realized, while drawing inspiration from practical, on-the-ground examples of the society they want to see, even if the ‘shell of the old’ remains intact.

Recalling the assertion I made in Chapter 4, organic intellectuals within the NFU and Union Paysanne will need to move beyond militant particularism as they strive to advance food sovereignty through institutionalization and movement-building. What I am stressing here however is that, although the war of position is ultimately aimed at establishing a counterhegemonic political program and taking state power, this will likely be best achieved by the popularization of various forms of real utopias. In other words, grassroots and institutional innovations—within and beyond the food sector—need to be linked, through political education, to a broader vision that is distinctly non-capitalist. This should help address concerns that farmers and others evidently have that governments can be corrupted or slow to innovate, as this approach would be much more horizontal than top-down. A political program thus developed could then align with a war of position that engages the state, but without extinguishing innovation at the community level.

It must also be noted that the value of real utopias, generally speaking, is that they emphasize the agency that farmers and their allies can have within the structures of capitalism. It can be terribly defeatist to focus solely on the political-economic challenges posed by the alignment of
corporations, the state, and elites in society that are perpetuating an industrial food system. Real utopias, when seen in relation to the structural tendencies under capitalism, prove that farmers have some room to create alternatives despite the powerful forces that are constraining food sovereignty and agroecology. As Gramsci observed during the ‘red years’ following the First World War in Italy, both urban workers and peasants can be motivated to push for radical change when levels of civil unrest reach a breaking point (Trudell 2007). Although reactionary forces eventually quashed these actions, labourers’ collective occupation of factories across urban centres gained momentum for a time, in parallel with land occupations and rural strikes in the south of the country (ibid.). Similarly, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx (1972) analyzed the potential for revolutionary revolt to materialize when he wrote about the developments leading to the French coup of 1851. As he described, even bourgeois classes have the potential to contribute to significant social change when they are motivated to do so, and when their interests align with those of the working classes and peasants in a given political conjuncture.

Capitalist structures are not so oppressive or monolithic that they prevent social groups from exercising any agency. Rather, tendencies and structures under capitalist political economies need to be seen in dialectical relation to the agency of various classes. Certain actions may be constrained within the dominant hegemony, but there is always the potential for groups to be inspired to move beyond reformism and collaborate to bring about significant social change. In the Canadian context, real utopias can therefore help farmers to overcome the tensions that may inhibit them from building alliances with various groups. If they are thoughtfully developed, these alternative socio-economic arrangements can, for example, help farmers and Indigenous peoples to resolve tensions over land relations, or establish food distribution schemes that enable low-income people to access ecologically grown food. If such groups come to see how their interests converge despite their class-
based or socio-cultural differences, they may well be inspired to take action to establish a counterhegemonic order in ways that may seem spontaneous or unpredictable. As discussed below, the possibility for such a war of position to arise also raises questions about how social groups can effectively organize for change when political society seems driven to uphold the status quo.

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A war of leverage?

One final point that must be made about political education concerns how to build on and develop prefigurative approaches when the state and civil society erect so many barriers to their realization in a capitalist economy. As discussed in Chapter 4, implementing ideas based on ‘good sense’ (e.g. pertaining to ecological farming or climate change mitigation) can be constrained and prevented from multiplying by existing hegemonic policy frameworks. Organic intellectuals are thus faced with the challenge of not only building a politically educated movement that supports emerging ‘real utopias,’ but also determining how to scale out such initiatives without the benefit of holding political power. Recognizing the limitations of political education is thus important. “Knowledge is power,” according to the saying often attributed to Francis Bacon, however knowledge is only power if it leads to action and has material consequences. Based on my field research and interviews conducted with NFU and Union Paysanne members, it is clear that the strategic use of civil disobedience, i.e. direct action tactics, will be a key way to compensate for these organizations’ limited resources and political power.

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91 See Sanbonmatsu (2004) for a discussion of social movements, strategy, tactics, and the potential for spontaneity in the generation of social change. He provides an interesting comparison of Gramsci and Foucault’s theories on these matters.
Interestingly, both the NFU and Union Paysanne have at times engaged in direct action when other forms of advocacy were deemed insufficient. For example, the NFU—and the provincial farmers’ unions that eventually founded the organization in 1969—demonstrated a history of innovative direct action tactics aimed at protecting or advancing members’ interests. These included pickets and marches at provincial legislatures and on Parliament Hill, ‘tractorcades’ that made their way into city centres as a form of protest, and highway blockades that shut down traffic circulation altogether (Dodds and Forsey 2009; NFU 2009). Disruptive tactics also saw farmers release chickens into the Ontario legislature in 1966 (Dodds and Forsey 2009: 38); while, in 1991, “NFU members attended a rally of 1300 farmers in Brandon, Manitoba, [where] farmers dumped a truckload of wheat to dramatize the need for an immediate support payment” (NFU 2009: 17). These instances of civil disobedience have become less common in recent years, however, in 2010, NFU members in the Kingston, Ontario area collaborated with a range of grassroots groups to protest the Conservative government’s unjustified closing of the city’s prison farms (Entz forthcoming; Epstein 2014). At the climax of the organizing efforts, dozens of non-farmers joined local farmers to physically block trucks from entering one of the penitentiaries to remove dairy cattle that had been a key feature of the farm (ibid.).

As for Union Paysanne, although the organization does not have as long a history, it too has engaged in direct action on occasion. Notably, around the time that Union Paysanne was formed in 2001, both farmers and non-farmer ‘citizen’ members periodically engaged in protests and actions that pressured Quebec’s government to curtail the rapid expansion of industrial hog operations that had been causing serious socio-ecological harm in rural areas (Guay 2005; Interview, Nov. 27, 2015). More recently, although not organized by Union Paysanne per se, a Quebec dairy farmer gained significant attention by dumping over 10,000 litres of liquid manure in the parking lot of the local
office of the *Union des producteurs agricoles* (UPA) as a means of protesting low milk prices that producers are receiving (TVA Nouvelles 2017; Union Paysanne 2017).

The various attempts at direct action tactics by the NFU and Union Paysanne over the years have had mixed results, with not all of these efforts leading to successful outcomes. Nevertheless, some successes have been achieved, and direct action is evidently much more likely to disrupt the tendency of governments at various scales to ignore proposals put forward by food sovereignty advocates, and to favour the interests of more mainstream, conventional agricultural organizations. Innovative approaches to civil disobedience can, when implemented effectively, embarrass and pressure governments, and garner support from the general public. Crucially, these approaches also leverage the limited resources that groups like the NFU and Union Paysanne have, with the potential to generate disproportionately greater positive outcomes.

Gramsci recognized that the state, with its monopoly on violence, could not be overcome in a war of manoeuvre—a revolution by force—however the potential for direct action to generate social change suggests that a war of position could incorporate a ‘war of leverage.’ By this I mean a strategic approach, led by organic intellectuals, to advance the interests of an emerging counterhegemonic historic bloc not only through cultural efforts and political education, but also through direct action tactics that address specific struggles and campaigns. In other words, the general war of position that is aimed at replacing the capitalist elites in political society can advance by embracing civil disobedience initiatives that address militant particularisms. Gramsci certainly did not suggest that a war of position would preclude the forms of direct action I am discussing here, however, given that scholars and others sometimes mistakenly assume that he was advocating for
reformism, the war of leverage draws an important conceptual distinction that illustrates a war of position need not be inherently passive.

Evidently, in the current capitalist hegemony it will be necessary to ensure that a radical pedagogy supports such a war of leverage by informing subaltern classes of the value of direct action tactics, as well as how to effectively engage in them. Civil disobedience techniques are already taught as part of many campaigns, and so a radical pedagogy would only push this further. While it may seem improbable that NFU and Union Paysanne members would engage in the kind of land occupations initiated by the MST in Brazil, the fact that these organizations already have some history of engaging in direct action tactics suggests that there is existing momentum on which to build.

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5.5 - Conclusion

Gramsci (1971: 276) noted that during a hegemonic crisis, the ruling class loses its consensus and is compelled to be

“dominant” [by] exercising coercive force alone, [and] this means …that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.

This oft-quoted sentiment points to some of the key themes raised in this chapter. Canadian farmers are evidently still attached to ‘traditional’ (i.e. capitalist) ideologies for the most part—hesitating to critique the dominant system. Yet many of them are also demonstrating a desire to help generate change both in the food system and in terms of more equitable economic relations generally. From sliding-scale CSA programs to the development of land trusts, members of the NFU and Union
Paysanne are responding to the ‘morbid symptoms’ associated with a global food system that is socio-ecologically destructive. Unfortunately, these responses are rather marginal, and they are often based on a prefigurative politics that does not bridge the gap from ‘real utopias’ to the war of position that would demand a systemic transformation, a new ideology.

I have essentially argued here that the ‘new’ (ideology, hegemony, society…) will only be born when farmers and non-farmers recognize that their interstitial approaches to supporting food sovereignty and agroecology need to merge with broader counterhegemonic efforts, and that taking power at the state level must be a long-term goal. The role of organic intellectuals—within the NFU and Union Paysanne, and among their allies—will be to educate their peers as to why the capitalist system itself must be replaced, while helping them to unlearn the post-political notion that ‘there is no alternative.’ As part of this effort, these intellectuals will need to identify shared interests among various classes and social groups as a means to build a historic bloc that could develop a political program incorporating, but not being limited to, food sovereignty.

This calls for a radical pedagogy. La Vía Campesina and some of its member organizations, such as the MST, have demonstrated the kinds of political education that can help farmers and non-farmers, rural and urban, appreciate the value of praxis. To draw on Gramsci again, this bridging of theory and particular struggles is necessary because recognizing that capitalism itself is at the root of the socio-ecological problems we face can indeed lead to a ‘pessimism of the intellect’; yet a focus on alternative economies and ecologies that are being generated
despite capitalism’s hegemony can provide one with the ‘optimism of the will’ needed to proceed without losing hope. As I have suggested, despite the limited resources of Canadian farmers’ organizations and subaltern groups, a ‘war of leverage’ based on the strategic use of direct action may be a key way to ensure that ground
is gained in the ongoing war of position. It is fortunate then, that the NFU and Union Paysanne already have organic intellectuals who, to some degree at least, have demonstrated an interest in anticapitalist analysis, alliance building, political education and civil disobedience.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 - Arise ye peoples

I sit down to write this conclusion in the midst of a heat wave that has descended upon Ontario.

With extreme temperatures being reported throughout the province and into Quebec, I think about the farmers I have met over the last five years who may be out repairing fences, harvesting vegetables or sitting on a tractor for what must seem like endless hours in the humidity and scorching sun. No doubt they are paying even more attention to this heat than we non-farmers given that, on farms, these are both the conditions of production and the working conditions for those labouring to grow food.

In some ways not much has changed since I began this research project. Farmers remain more attuned to the vagaries of the weather than the rest of us. Mortgages still need to be paid and mouths still need to be fed. And, all the while, people of the global south are more likely to be experiencing the devastating impacts of floods, droughts and tropical storms that come with climate change than those in Canada. In the introductory chapter I sketched out the conceptual contours of climate justice, yet I intentionally did not dwell on describing the immediate threats that climate change poses. There are simply so many discussions of glacial sheets melting, sea levels rising, and the like that the calls to action they are meant to invoke become clichéd and, arguably, ineffective. Yet it is difficult not to be emotionally moved by images of the human faces of climate impacts—e.g., emaciated families and their dying livestock in drought-stricken areas; refugee camps full of internally displaced persons whose homes were destroyed by an extreme storm. There is an inherent
tension in the fact that these images are likely to compel people to either mentally shut down (Marshall 2014) or to behave like ‘good’ (neurotic) citizens and donate to a charity that is scrambling to help those in need (Berglez and Olausson 2014), when much more systemic solutions are required. There is also a geographical tension when it comes to climate chaos in that those of us living in Canada are less likely to acknowledge the severity of the situation because we are so far removed from the worst impacts of rising global temperatures. 

These tensions are not new. However there are new developments that have occurred since I began this research project that either directly relate to the politics of climate change and food sovereignty, or indirectly affect the context in which these struggles and debates are taking place. We have seen a new (Liberal) federal government elected in Canada (in 2015) that has signed the Paris Agreement and promised action on climate change, and yet has failed to take significant steps to shift the nation away from a severe dependence on fossil fuels. Perhaps the height of this hypocrisy was marked by the government’s recent decision to purchase the Trans Mountain pipeline in western Canada for $4.5 billion; a project explicitly geared toward the continued extraction of tar sands bitumen in Alberta. In 2016, of course, we also saw a new (Republican) President elected in the United States. Donald Trump’s success—based on a reactionary and bombastic populism—was built, at least in part, on the vulnerabilities felt by working class Americans who have been struggling with job losses, rising debt loads and economic inequality that has been fuelled by over thirty years of neoliberal capitalism. With so-called ‘free’ trade agreements being hotly debated and protectionist economic measures taking hold, new questions must be raised about sovereignty and governance. Geopolitical developments indicate that a shifting of hegemonic power is taking place on the playing field of global capitalism, while the actions of elected officials in both Canada and the U.S. point to the

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92 While I am speaking generally here, I acknowledge that there are important exceptions to this statement: e.g., those in Canada’s far north, the Inuit, are indeed struggling to deal with severe climate change impacts.
troubling fact that formal democratic processes are actually concealing a deeply embedded corporatocracy and an emerging authoritarianism. Gramsci would perhaps have asked if these instances are ‘morbid symptoms’ of the old world dying. It certainly seems clear that there is significant potential for continued oppression, xenophobia, and exploitation of both human and non-human natures. Yet perhaps there is a chance that these troubling times may provide an opening for a transition to a much more egalitarian counterhegemony.

When Gramsci (1992) wrote about “Pessimism of the intellect [or ‘intelligence’], optimism of the will,” he was clear about the need for both. This was a motto that he adopted as the masthead of the weekly newspaper he helped to launch in 1919, *L’Ordine Nuovo* (“The New Order”) (Buttigieg 1992).

Writing on the topic from prison six years after his arrest, Gramsci had this to say:

> Optimism and pessimism. It should be noted that very often optimism is nothing more than a defense of one’s laziness, one’s irresponsibility, the will to do nothing. It is also a form of fatalism and mechanicism. One relies on factors extraneous to one’s will and activity, exalts them, and appears to burn with sacred enthusiasm. And enthusiasm is nothing more than the external adoration of fetishes. A reaction [is] necessary which must have the intelligence for its point of departure. The only justifiable enthusiasm is that which accompanies the intelligent will, intelligent activity, the inventive richness of concrete initiatives which change existing reality. (Quoted in Buttigieg 1992: 12)

Throughout this dissertation I have tried to clearly express that, as a scholar activist and aspiring organic intellectual, I am enthusiastic about the potential for food sovereignty and agroecology to be taken up in the Canadian context, yet I am also well aware of the very significant challenges that exist in this regard. In this concluding chapter I will briefly summarize some of the challenges I have identified, while also recalling some of the evident opportunities for a counterhegemonic movement to be mobilized in this country—in the spirit of maintaining an ‘optimism of the will.’
I am attempting, therefore, to emulate the mixture of pessimism and optimism that is captured in the *Climate Justice Poem* by the Zimbabwean Peasant Movement (ZPM) that I included as an epigraph. The poem does anything but express a blind enthusiasm for food sovereignty and agroecology, noting that climate change is causing the widespread loss of both biodiversity and human life (“Women, men and children, plants and animals perish!”), while it is “Capitalist industrial agriculture” and the “false solutions” to the ecological crisis that are dominating (ZPM 2017). In the poem, ZPM understandably does not paint a cheery picture of the situation at hand. Yet at the same time it implies that this is the context in which movements should globalize the struggle and globalize the hope. “Arise ye peoples” it asks of those from “all the corners of the earth” who would work for climate justice—Far from a resigned fatalism. This brings to mind several tensions—between such calls coming from Zimbabwe when capitalist industrial agriculture has proliferated from the global north; between the urgent need for action on climate change and the necessity for long-term systemic solutions; between pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will—and these tensions are central to the ideas raised in this dissertation.

In fact, in summarizing the contributions I have made, I will frame the discussion in terms of a number of issues and approaches that, I will argue, need to be held in dialectical tension (see Table 6-1). Dialectical methodology was central to Marx’s thinking and has run through historical materialist works since his time—including, of course, Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*. Influenced by Hegel, Marx demonstrated that this methodology is crucial to understanding social, economic and political processes (Harvey 1996: Ch. 2; Kamenka 1983). Dialectical tensions are evident in the opposing tendencies or internal contradictions that we can observe in analyzing given processes, social relations and political struggles. These tensions may (potentially at least) be resolved at “a higher
level in a new synthesis in which these contradictions are overcome” (Kamenka 1983: 565). The dynamic of opposing tension and resolution suggests that the development of societal forces is often marked by “sudden leaps” rather than gradual historical change (Ibid.). In Harvey’s (1996: 49) words, “Dialectical thinking emphasizes the understanding of processes, flows, fluxes, and relations over the analysis of elements, things, structures, and organized systems.” It points to the fact that change is a predictable characteristic of systems and the internally heterogeneous components of those systems, whether those components are human bodies, cities, or ‘things’ that we could analyze at various other levels (Harvey 1996: 51-53).

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Table 6-1: Issues and approaches held in dialectical tension. Items in one column do not necessarily align with others in the same column, although there can be overlap.

Practically speaking this means that understanding food sovereignty struggles in Canada—or counterhegemonic struggles more broadly—should not be based on a static snapshot of the

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93 Kamenka (1983: 565) articulates dialectical contradictions in terms of a conflict of opposites: “The opposites—thesis and antithesis—require each other, cannot exist without bringing each other into being, and the dialectic is thus not fortuitous and not to be grasped without seeing the wider whole of which these opposites are part.” It must be noted though that there are many different (and often divergent) interpretations and discussions of dialectics, and that Marx never clearly laid out a ‘dialectical method.’ As Harvey (1996: 48) states, “The only way to understand his method is by following his practice.” And, while Harvey lays out eleven propositions that summarize the principles of dialectics, he does so as a means to move forward so that “the principles themselves [may] disappear into a flow of theoretical and political practices” (Ibid. 49).
challenging situation facing groups like the National Farmers Union (NFU) and Union Paysanne. “The exploration of ‘possible worlds’ is integral to dialectical thinking,” Harvey noted (1996: 56). As such, in the next section I will summarize the arguments I have made throughout this dissertation, but then follow that with a brief fictional sketch of the food system that could be, if agroecology and food sovereignty were to gain momentum as part of counterhegemonic struggles. I will then conclude by highlighting a number of research questions that merit further exploration based on this study.

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6.2 - Pessimism of the intellect

Theory and practice

As stated in Chapter 1, spending time on farms and contributing my labour as I conducted my research was a new experience for me. It was nevertheless important for me to get a grasp on the practical realities that farmers deal with on a daily basis as they grow vegetables and grains, and raise livestock to feed people. These experiences helped me to answer one of the key research questions that I had:

• How are ecological farmers contributing to a more ‘climate-friendly’ agriculture in Canada, and what challenges are these farmers—and organizations such as the NFU and Union Paysanne—facing in attempting to formulate and further the food sovereignty agenda in relation to climate change mitigation?

As I explained in Chapter 3, the first part of this question is a significant one, because ecological farmers are at once helping to avoid and mitigate greenhouse gas emissions while also facing serious
challenges in ‘scaling out’ from the margins of the agricultural system and in reaching their ‘agroecological potential.’ By taking measures to avoid fossil-fuel intensive inputs and processes connected with industrial farming, including by eschewing nitrogen-based fertilizers, ecological farmers are certainly contributing to a more climate-friendly agriculture. Similarly, these farmers are contributing to carbon sequestration much more so than their conventional counterparts, as they are fostering ‘living soils’ that can help capture carbon, and this is especially true in perennial cultivation and in pasture-based livestock systems where ruminants are made to graze through planned rotations.

As I discussed though, ecological farmers are well aware of the limitations they face and, in particular, the practices that are permitted in organic agriculture that could be improved upon. This includes the use of diesel tractors on farms and trucks to transport foods to customers, while the use of plastics, some organic pesticides, and the practice of tillage all leave something to be desired from a carbon accounting standpoint. Similarly, it would be naïve to be overly optimistic about the contributions that ecological farmers are making to fight climate change when there are so few of them. Industrial agriculture remains ubiquitous across Canada, and Intensive Livestock Operations (ILOs) are a key part of this landscape, contributing to the 14.5 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions tied to raising animals through unsustainable (and typically inhumane) means (Gerber et al. 2013; Weis 2013). As I argued, agroecology is an essential concept both in terms of contextualizing on-farm practices and connecting those practices with agroecological science and a social movement intrinsic to food sovereignty struggles that would see this kind of farming expand.

Indeed, getting to the ‘sweet spot’ of agroecology will involve seeing its practical, scientific and movement-oriented dimensions overlap. Agroecologists can increasingly support farmers by
collaboratively determining, documenting, and disseminating information regarding effective on-farm practices, just as these scientists could help develop and implement carbon accounting methodologies to address the knowledge gap that exists about just how ‘climate-friendly’ a given farm ecosystem is. At the same time, social scientists (or ‘political agroecologists’) can contribute to analyzing the socio-political challenges at hand, such as how to actualize a ‘just transition’ in Canadian agriculture. This transition is required given how labour-intensive it is to shift away from fossil-fuel reliant farming practices, especially when it comes to the conventional farmers who have been trapped in the debt-laden, ‘get-big-or-get-out’, mechanized approach to agriculture that has been fostered by governments and corporations in this country for decades. Additionally, as the NFU and Union Paysanne are demonstrating, a social movement for agroecology is beginning to emerge, and while few people—including ecological farmers—are aware of the concept at this point, it is gradually being linked to food sovereignty struggles and the politics of a desired agrarian transformation.

In many ways, from a movement-oriented perspective, agroecology runs counter to not only industrial agriculture but also to capitalist agriculture. This is because it is about closing ecological and economic circuits. Appropriationism, as mentioned in Chapter 2, is about profiting from agriculture by selling farmers (or, ‘petty commodity producers’) inputs and means of production that are produced as commodities off-farm; agroecology demands the opposite—e.g. by meeting fertility needs and recycling waste on-farm as much as possible. It is about countering the ecology of the industrial grain-oilseed-livestock complex that has developed based on the desire of proponents of capitalist agriculture to overcome the challenges associated with seasonality, distance, and the complexities of biological diversity that make farming unlike factory production. However, this
points to a key dialectical tension associated with advancing agroecology in that it can be difficult to arrive at an agroecological praxis by bridging the theory and practice associated with the concept.

To quote again an eastern Ontario farmer to whom I referred in Chapter 3, “A lot of very good ideas are very complicated ideas” (Interview, May 26, 2016), and agroecology is one of those ideas that is at risk of seeming academic and divorced from the realities of on-farm production. Growing food as ecologically as possible can be a gruelling affair that is also mentally taxing, therefore there is a limited capacity for farmers to be at the forefront of advocating for agroecology as a social movement and science, even if they agree that it will help to mitigate climate change, revive rural economies, or contribute to socio-economic justice in the food system. Similarly, while scientists, social scientists and others may be motivated to support an agroecological transition—and theoretically understand how the capitalist food system raises significant barriers to the emergence of an alternative agriculture (such as land access, marketing, and knowledge production)—they have little political power to facilitate such a transition. Expanding agroecology in Canada means confronting the capitalist food system, including the agri-business companies and retailers that are profiting from the ‘corporate food regime’ that has been creeping toward hegemonic dominance. Yet it also means confronting the ideological messaging that is constantly promulgated in support of the status quo—e.g., that the kinds of conventional agricultural practices dominant in Canada are ‘feeding the world,’ and that the specialization and economies of scale that exist in the food system are unquestionably ‘efficient’. Hence there is a need for a counterhegemonic agroecology, and it will not be easy to resolve the tensions between the theory and practice that would realize this kind of agroecology.

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Institutionalization, co-optation, and radicalism

While farmers face challenges such as those outlined here individually, there is also the matter of the NFU and Union Paysanne attempting to advance agroecology and food sovereignty politically. As described in Chapter 4, both organizations are committed to developing analyses and policy-related proposals that, if implemented, would contribute to a substantially more climate-friendly and food sovereign agricultural model in Canada. These organizations’ efforts at institutionalizing food sovereignty are noteworthy in that they demonstrate a vision that runs counter to the government-supported frameworks that have helped the industrial, corporate food system become established over the last hundred years. As discussed, the NFU and Union Paysanne are putting forward concrete ideas on topics such as marketing, land access, and climate change that would create room for the expansion of ecological, localized and smaller-scale farming. For example, putting caps on quota held in supply-managed sectors, gradually decapitalizing quota, and raising non-quota limits (exemption thresholds) would contribute to a more diversified agricultural landscape, encouraging the integration of animals and crops on the same farm, which is certainly in line with agroecology. Changing land laws to encourage the parcelling of land and the establishment of models such as land trusts, while eliminating corporate ownership and speculation, would also help new entrants to ecological farming overcome perhaps the most significant barrier to getting started in the sector. And, finally, implementing a tax-and-refund carbon pricing scheme would hold the potential to incentivize agroecological farming while reversing the systems in place that facilitate fossil-fuel intensive agriculture.

Importantly, as I argued, one must also take into consideration the socio-cultural contexts in which these efforts to institutionalize food sovereignty are taking place. The dialectical tension between
avoiding the co-optation of this concept, while also striving to popularize it (along with agroecology), is evidently a matter of concern. The situation in Quebec is particularly fraught, given that ‘sovereignty’ has substantial currency in the province (*qua* nation), and due to the extent to which the *Union des producteurs agricoles* (UPA) is embedded in the functioning of the ministry of agriculture. The fact that UPA contributed to establishing a ‘food sovereignty coalition,’ and that the Parti Québécois implemented a food sovereignty policy, is astounding. Even though this was a short-lived policy, promptly erased when the Liberal Party regained power, it remains to be seen whether the relative popularity of food sovereignty will help Union Paysanne overcome the watered-down interpretations of the concept and reconnect it with a radical vision for a transformed food system. Trying to do so in the context of a syndicate monopoly will be no easy feat, and while Union Paysanne has been adamant that a plurality of union representation is important for democracy in Quebec’s food system, I would argue that a single farmers’ union, deeply embedded in the state, could in fact be aligned with genuine food sovereignty if the union were not supporting industrial agriculture and ‘cartelization’.

Outside of Quebec, the potential for food sovereignty to be co-opted exists, but to a lesser extent. It seems clear that specific demands associated with food sovereignty, rather than the term itself, are likely to gain momentum, albeit in a fragmented and partial manner. The key example from Ontario is the *Local Food Act*, implemented in 2013, which has done nothing to counter the industrial, corporate food system in the province. In addition to this evidence of defensive localism, there is also the forthcoming National Food Policy, which may give rise to a Canada-wide food policy council. As described, while this could be touted as a contribution toward the democratic governance of the food system, a key issue will be the composition of the food policy council and, specifically, the influence of corporate players and industry associations.
It is with this risk of co-optation in mind that I argued that the attempted institutionalization of food sovereignty must be held in dialectical tension with movement building. The political-economic realities of Canada’s food system point to significant power imbalances that will not be corrected by farmers’ organizations that have effectively been marginalized in policy processes for decades. This points to the second research question that I posed at the outset of this research project:

- How can ecological farmers in this country build strategic alliances as a means to advance their campaigns for food sovereignty and agroecology, such as with climate activists and environmental organizations, and what obstacles do they face in this regard?

Given the potential for ecological farming practices to help mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and sequester carbon, it seems that climate change is one key area where the NFU and Union Paysanne could garner support for the policies they are proposing. As I discussed in the latter part of Chapter 4 though, there are practical and political reasons that it may be difficult to establish alliances with environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs), including those focusing on climate change campaigns.

On top of severely limited financial and human resources within the NFU and Union Paysanne, there may also be a lack of motivation for working with ENGOs, given that they are enmeshed in the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) and thus structurally constrained from working on long-term and politicized issues such as food sovereignty and agroecology. At the same time, ENGOs face pressure to focus on issues of concern to urban donors, given that Canada’s population is concentrated in cities. It may be too much to expect these organizations’ target audiences to prioritize agricultural policies and policy proposals that they perceive to be far (literally and figuratively) from their immediate concerns. On the other hand, there is the dialectical tension
inherent in the fact that some NFU and Union Paysanne members are committed to a radical view of food sovereignty, and may find it difficult to compromise if potential allies call for a ‘progressive’ approach to be taken. By this I mean that many ENGOs could be willing to support campaigns related to food sovereignty, yet would necessarily opt for a limited advocacy approach that will be more likely to resonate with policy-makers and the general public. There is a fine line between engaging in ‘big tent’ politics, which could possibly build support for a climate-friendly agriculture in Canada while simultaneously diluting the politics of agroecology and food sovereignty, and striving to establish a historic bloc geared toward system change.

This is not a tension that is easily resolvable. Until the need for system change is felt by social groups broadly, there may well be times when pragmatic ‘bridge-building’ will need to take place—held in tension with the kind of firm ideological adherence that links food sovereignty to critiques of capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism and racism. As implied in Chapter 4, in the immediate term it makes strategic sense for the NFU and Union Paysanne to look beyond ENGOs as a source of alliance building. Climate activists not tied up in the NPIC will be one place to look for like-minded allies, but it seems wiser to begin by identifying those actors who are marginalized within the Canadian food system specifically. Referring back to the agrarian question, I argued that there are three subaltern groups that stand out as potential allies that would be motivated by struggles for food sovereignty and agroecology. It seems clear that the interests of Indigenous peoples, racialized workers in the food system, and low-income people in Canada would all align with the NFU and Union Paysanne’s vision for system change. As such, the agrarian question being asked is not just whether farmers will pursue capitalist agriculture or more socially just and ecologically benign forms of food production and distribution; the question becomes one of which groups will align with farmers who are struggling to advance food sovereignty.
Posing this question, and focusing on the three groups identified, also points to a way to address the dialectical tension between generalizing struggles and militant particularism. As I have suggested, particularist, place-based and issue-specific issues and campaigns are important in their own right and should not be entirely subsumed in a war of position for societal transformation. The two are, in fact, not opposites. They can, and should, be held in complementarity. However, it is not such a significant leap for food sovereignty proponents to build alliances with groups who are, variously, (1) seeing their traditional food systems continually disrupted by settler-colonial extractive projects, (2) facing some of the worst forms of exploitation due to unjust immigration and agricultural/food-industry labour laws, or (3) struggling with the material deprivation that comes with food insecurity—a direct consequence of income insecurity in an increasingly unequal political economy. This is a key practical way for the NFU and Union Paysanne to begin contributing to a historic bloc and resolving the tensions between general and specific struggles. Nevertheless, a healthy does of intellectual pessimism would compel one to acknowledge the significant challenges that exist in alliance building generally—from the resources and cultural openness required to connect with diverse groups to the distinct practical and political challenges to which each group must respond.

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*Capitalocentrism, leadership, and the war of position*

These themes tie in with the issues discussed in Chapter 5, where I focused on the third research question I asked:

- Given that international groups like La Vía Campesina argue that the implementation of food sovereignty and agroecology demand profound systemic changes, how are these
concepts to be translated in the Canadian context in productive ways, and what challenges exist in terms of advancing these concepts?

While drawing on additional interview data and ethnographic observations from my fieldwork, I attempted in my penultimate chapter to take a step back and discuss the larger issues that are implicit in this question. I made it clear in Chapter 2 that I agree with La Vía Campesina when it critiques capitalism explicitly, and that calling for ‘profound systemic changes’ mentioned here thus refers to establishing food sovereignty under a different political-economic framework altogether. As such, I discussed the subjectivities of Canadian farmers in relation to capitalism. In some ways, members of the NFU and Union Paysanne who I met are very much sympathetic to economic arrangements wherein profit seeking and accumulation for accumulation’s sake are set aside, prioritizing ecological flows and social needs (i.e. food as a use value) instead. These leanings were demonstrated by farmers’ sliding-scale Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, by their fostering of on-farm biodiversity even when crop specialization would be more financially lucrative, and by land relations that shift away from private landownership models and from property as an investment strategy.

At the same time, it is much more likely to hear farmers express sentiments that make it seem improbable for food sovereignty to translate as an anticapitalist project in the Canadian context. In interviews, farmers I spoke with typically qualified capitalism (e.g., as ‘reckless’ or ‘exploitative’), suggesting that the particular form of capitalism in place today is destructive, whereas a kinder, gentler capitalism of yesteryear would be preferable. It was also notable that many farmers directly implied that ‘there is no alternative’ to capitalism, as any other system that has been tried (read: communism) has failed or would be undesirable/impracticable. In fact, with some interviewees suggesting that it will take a profound systemic crisis before political and civil society will be moved
to deal meaningfully with something as profound as climate change, my research provides support for the notion that, ideologically, “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (Jameson 2003: 76).

As I discussed, organic intellectuals within the NFU and Union Paysanne are aware of the challenges implied by prevailing limits to the scope of political imagination. It is certainly difficult to explore and articulate other ‘possible worlds’ as critical, dialectical thinkers when both farmers and non-farmers are so embedded in the existing capitalist political economy, and when prefigurative alternatives seem so marginal and fleeting. Yet tensions between capitalocentric (oppositional) stances taken up by food sovereignty proponents (within La Vía Campesina and beyond) and the proposition implied by scattered ‘real utopias’ suggests there may in fact be an alternative to capitalism. As I argued in Chapter 5, real utopias will only be aligned with food sovereignty and agroecology as radical projects if they are to bridge the gap from isolated instances of prefiguration to a war of position aimed at replacing the dominant (capitalist) hegemony. Political education, already being taken up by some organic intellectuals with the NFU and Union Paysanne, will be central to resolving these tensions. A radical pedagogy, as practiced by groups such as the MST in Brazil, offers the prospect of informing farmers and their allies of the necessity of confronting capitalism, while recognizing that the system is not monolithic, as alternative socio-economic relations do indeed exist and can be replicated.

The challenge, however, is that many farmers seem content to practice their prefigurative politics in isolation, failing to see that alternatives must ultimately be scaled out as a means to supplant industrial agriculture and the corporate food regime. In this light, a libertarian undercurrent within farming circles cannot be ignored, and there are good reasons to acknowledge the underlying
reasons why people tend to be sceptical about engaging directly with the state as a strategy for social change. The potential for cynical and self-serving behaviour among political elites to stall progress, or for government bureaucracies to limit innovation, are real concerns, even outside of a capitalist political economy. At the same time, institutionalizing food sovereignty will be essential, as government policies, laws and legislation are the levers that ultimately determine how food regimes are established. Yet, as Gramsci observed, there is always an additional tension that exists between hegemony as domination versus hegemony as leadership. In Canada today, common sense thinking is so prevalent that post-political approaches to food and climate issues—e.g., individualistic, responsible consumerism, and voluntarism—dominate. Hegemony as leadership reigns. However, social groups have the agency and potential to collectively organize and overcome differences between them to push for revolutionary change. If there were to be a cultural shift wherein political discontent was much more palpable, and a new historic bloc began to emerge though, then the superficially pacific government of Canada would likely soon make it clear that the state has a monopoly on violence.

In the latter part of Chapter 5, I argued that a ‘war of leverage’ should be a component of a war of position, with groups taking advantage of opportunities for civil disobedience to have an impact. I did not mean to imply that this would be easily accomplished, or that the state would not retaliate if the status quo of political-economic arrangements were threatened in any significant way. However, a radical pedagogy that incorporates training in direct action tactics is a plausible approach for food sovereignty proponents to consider, for one because farmers and their allies will need to leverage

94 This kind of violent reaction was on display in Italy prior to Gramsci’s arrest. As Trudell (2007) describes, in response to factory occupations and rural strikes, industrialists and the state organized to regain the upper hand as soon as revolutionary forces across the country were compromised. “The government created a Royal Guard of 25,000 men, bolstered carabinieri [Italian paramilitary police] numbers to 160,000 and increased police powers. These forces killed about 100 workers and peasants between October 1919 and May 1920.”
their limited resources and opportunities to be disruptive, and secondly because both the NFU and Union Paysanne have demonstrated an inclination for civil disobedience historically.

A war of leverage also points to another dialectical tension. With climate change already having devastating impacts in various parts of the world, and food system crises escalating—as most notably evidenced by the fact that over 800 million people are now facing food insecurity—it is worth asking whether there is time to engage in a long-term war of position when change is urgently needed. In concluding his book on the geographies of climate change, *Tropic of Chaos*, Christian Parenti (2011: 241) acknowledged that capitalism may not be able to “accommodat[e] itself to the limits of the natural world,” but argued nonetheless that humanity simply does not have time to transition to another form of economy. With the crises that exist worldwide, he suggested, “we cannot wait to transform *everything*” (ibid. emphasis in original), therefore we will have to work within capitalism to develop alternative energy systems and the like. I certainly agree that capitalism is not going to be replaced by a more just and socio-ecologically sane system imminently. However, the intertwined food-climate crises that exist today will never be resolved within a system that is based on a logic of exploiting human and non-human nature, including by ‘externalizing’ environmental costs (as the economists say), and degrading the conditions of production (O’Connor 1988; Smith 2010 [1984]; Harvey 2006 [1982]). Therefore a war of position, and the long-term strategies such as political education that go with it, will certainly be necessary. With the urgency of the situation being held in dialectical tensions with these post-capitalist aspirations, a war of leverage will simply help accelerate the war of position, demarcating the political stakes of food sovereignty and related counterhegemonic struggles, and sparking the optimism of the will among those contributing to a new historic bloc.
Gramsci was well aware of such tensions, articulating the pull between extended political organizing and the potential for ‘mass spontaneity’ to initiate a shift in the balance of hegemonic power. As I have pointed out though, mass spontaneity will be highly unlikely unless the few farmers that remain in Canada build alliances with not only like-minded groups but also urban people and other non-farmers. The challenges associated with this kind of political organizing are monumental given the geographical and cultural divides that I documented between these groups. Yet it is promising that organic intellectuals within the NFU and Union Paysanne are already aware of the value of associate/citizen members contributing to their organizations, and there is the potential for this to lead to a broader aligning of general and particular struggles, as militant particularism related to advancing food sovereignty and agroecology comes to encompass identity-based and urban-centric political movements under the banner of counterhegemony. In other words, while it is possible to identify tendencies within capitalism that lead to exploitation and unsustainable socio-ecological relations, the system will seem far less monolithic when urban and rural peoples come together to develop and replicate prefigurative experiments that demonstrate the alignment of a wide range of social struggles—for equality, justice and ecological living.

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6.3 - Optimism of the will (Visions of the food system to come)

Rutabaga chips with rosemary. Pasture-raised beef from down the road. Kale salad and pickled beets. Delicious. A generation ago they probably wouldn’t have imagined that eating in season could be so good, but here we are. Many people have relearned how to not only grow food but also how to cook it. Of course, eating seasonally has changed somewhat given the fact that rising global temperatures have extended seasons and made it possible to grow foods this far north longer than
we could fifty or a hundred years ago. It’s 2068 though, so I would certainly hope that we’ve already seen the worst of the ‘feedback mechanisms’ and rising carbon dioxide levels that have continued to make it so difficult to farm. Weather is more unpredictable than it has ever been here, and we all know how hard some people have had it in other parts of the world, where massive humanitarian efforts have been required to relocate people or otherwise help them cope with climate disasters.

None of this has been easy. It certainly wasn’t easy to reign in greenhouse gas emissions in a fossil-fuel dependent country like Canada, and changing the food system was one of the biggest challenges we had. We had to recalibrate virtually every agricultural program so that agroecological farming was incentivized rather than the energy-intensive system that was in place before. Labour and immigration laws had to change so that people were drawn to farming again, and so that we would stop exploiting migrant workers who had become so embedded in food production here. It’s hard to believe that people can work four reasonable-length days a week and get by but, hey, we convinced people to eat less meat (almost eliminating it from their diets in the summer months) so anything seems possible. Educating people about the realities of the global food system and the need for food sovereignty was another enormous task of course, and one that continues to this day. We still have much to figure out, as food sovereignty does not yet exist in every country, and it can be hard to maintain the just trading relationships with those countries providing us the coffee, chocolate and other foods that we cannot grow here.

Yes, there’s still a lot to learn. I gather that interesting experiments are taking place to expand sugar beet production in Alberta now that all of the genetically modified varieties have been eradicated. Of course, some GM experiments continue to this day but, since plant life and other foods can no longer be patented, these experiments are happening alongside other public research, and traditional
and participatory plant breeding have been showing the most promise for years now. We could probably grow sugar beets on this farm, in fact, but we already have quite the diversity of crops to wrap our heads around.

You know, I think that it may actually have been our repaired relationships with Indigenous peoples in Canada that most affected our views on education about the food system and agricultural science. The process of decolonization and the widespread acceptance of traditional Indigenous knowledges went hand-in-hand. We no longer look at agriculture as our only source of food, with local fish, forest-based plants, and hunted meat (what we call ‘country’ food) contributing not only to Indigenous diets but to the rest of ours as well. Economies are social, based on meeting people’s needs rather than making profit, and Indigenous communities have been leaders in that regard. Also, most people now see themselves as part of nature, rather than separate from it—no longer thinking we’re able to ‘manage’ or dominate nature as we used to pretend we could. We stopped poisoning the soils with chemicals, not only because we knew this was contributing to climate change, but also because we saw that we were killing the lands and waters that were there to sustain us.

Speaking of lands and waters, perhaps the biggest reason that we were able to align and advance Indigenous food sovereignty and agroecology is because we finally got land relations sorted out. When popular movements came to realize the insanity of Indigenous peoples only being able to access 0.2 percent of Canada’s land mass, we were able to mobilize and pressure the government to return land that had been unjustly taken. None of that would have been possible, of course, unless we also struggled to make collective land access a legitimate model, with tenure not being based on private ‘ownership.’ Governments at various levels still oversee land regulations of course, but a popular agrarian reform (something we never thought possible in Canada) made sure that you didn’t
need to be rich in order to access your fair share of soil if you were ready to look after it and let it look after you. Money actually doesn’t enter into it at all since land is no longer treated as a commodity.

Just look at this farm that we’re on. Beyond that passive greenhouse (where there is still spinach growing, by the way, even in February) is our cooperative’s biggest house. All eight of the young people who live there used to be city dwellers. But the fact that we needed more people on the land to grow food agroecologically, and their ability to come join us here without having to buy land, gave them the incentive to make the move. It hasn’t been simple for all of them to learn how to farm, of course. It takes a lot of know-how to raise a diversity of animals, grains and veggies like we’re doing here. But fortunately those people are able to access public courses while at the same time learn the practical aspects of agroecology here on the farm. Heck, there’s still a lot for me to learn too, but at least I can access government extension service people when I need to troubleshoot a problem that we can’t seem to figure out.

The government supports are also important for ensuring production and distribution are organized at local, provincial and national scales. We aren’t growing all the food we need, of course, and we have our specialties (like carrots) that do really well in these soils, so we have customers for all those surpluses we come up with. The government programs were able to take the best experiments that had been happening before—from CSA programs to supply management—that needed to be tweaked or replicated in order to make sure we were feeding Canadians and trading what we didn’t need here at home. Fortunately, you no longer have huge corporations controlling food retail. All those processed ‘pseudo’ foods⁹⁵ are a thing of the past since it stopped being profitable to base

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⁹⁵ See Winson 2017.
food production on GM corn (no longer being subsidized) and all those artificial flavourings, colourings and such (that the government began taxing the heck out of). Did you ever hear about Hostess Twinkies? No? I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. You probably also haven’t heard of ‘food banks,’ which were a big thing before we started making sure that every single person would be guaranteed a liveable income so that they could afford the basic necessities of dignified living.

This isn’t to say that everything is resolved and static. As we know, food sovereignty is such a process, not an end goal, and so there is much work to do to continually govern the food system, especially since it is related to so many other decisions that need to be made and problems that need to be resolved. We’ve got our local workers’ council, our food shed’s board of representatives, and the regional food charter group for Ontario—all subnational decision-making bodies that need to both keep things organized and also make sure it doesn’t all get tied down in paperwork and bureaucracy. I sat on the board of our food shed for eight years, and I can tell you it’s a lot of work. There are simply so many logistics to sort out, for example when a local food hub is getting established, or when one of the food processing coops wants to start experimenting with new products or techniques. Plus we had fairly regular exchanges with folks from all over the world—Venezuela, India, Japan; you name it—so that we could compare agroecological models, governance at the local scale, and that kind of thing.

Well, as delicious as these rutabaga chips are, I had best be getting back to work. There are chores to be done in the barn, and I can see the others have wrapped up their lunches and are heading back to it. (I think those two over there are making sauerkraut from our cabbage this afternoon.) Nice to take a break once and a while though, where you can steal away and reflect on where we’re at and how much has changed. Indeed, so very much has changed…
6.4 - “In this interregnum…”

At the outset of this chapter I quoted Harvey’s (1996: 56) observation that the “exploration of ‘possible worlds’ is integral to dialectical thinking.” As Harvey also noted, although Marx—one of the key dialectical theorists historically—was antagonistic towards certain varieties of utopian thinking, he did see a need for a revolutionary movement to “create its own poetry” (ibid.: 14). I therefore included the short fictional piece in the preceding section as a mere suggestion of the kind of imaginative intellectual undertakings that will need to accompany political organizing and other counterhegemonic activities if food sovereignty is to be realized in Canada. There are a great many details that will need to be resolved before this country can begin to turn away from capitalism toward a more socially just and ecologically sound political economy, and challenging decisions will certainly be part of ongoing processes of change. Just as food sovereignty is a process, so must we aspire to achieve a utopianism of process (or, a ‘dialectical utopianism’) rather than a utopianism of form (Harvey 1996, 2000). Similarly, as Gramsci suggested, optimism of the will must be accompanied by “intelligent activity” and by “concrete initiatives [that] change existing reality.”

Thus, while it is important to insist that other worlds are possible, that alternatives exist—contra post-political, dystopian discourses—it is not enough to hope and dream without acknowledging the serious political and socio-cultural challenges that lie ahead for those who would seek to win a war of position.

In many ways then, the end of this dissertation is just the beginning of a long line of possible research endeavours and activist ventures. Personally, I aim to continue to pursue scholar activism.
and take my responsibility as an organic intellectual seriously. There are many politically engaged farmers I have met who I would be happy to work alongside as they also take on the duties of organic intellectual labour and strive to realize the food system we want to see. The concerted efforts of many allies working in solidarity will be required to counter the structural racism, dirty extractive projects, and forms of corporate exploitation that are only being exacerbated in today’s political climate. With developments on both sides of the Canada-U.S. border troubling many, there is at least some possibility that “in this interregnum,” while we may be witnessing the “morbid symptoms” of a hegemonic crisis, we can contribute to the beginnings of system change rather than capitalism’s deeper entrenchment. Just as intervals between food regimes can be facilitated by social groups’ deliberate naming of the problems in the food system (and challenging of the frames preferred by actors profiting from socio-ecological exploitation) (Friedmann 2005; Fairbairn 2010), this may be a key moment to draw attention to capitalism’s inherent flaws and the impossibility of reforming the system to solve the interconnected food-climate crises that exist today.

Specifically how food sovereignty and a non-capitalist hegemony may be brought about is a matter of much further reflection and debate. I can think of five key research questions extending beyond this dissertation that merit the attention of scholars and activists interested in these issues:

1. Given the political realities of the non-profit industrial complex, what room is there for ENGOs to contribute to food sovereignty struggles, and, if little room exists (as I have hypothesized), how might ecological farmers instead work with grassroots climate activists to work toward common goals?

2. How might other alliances effectively be built between farmers and ‘subaltern’ groups in Canada, including Indigenous peoples, migrant farm workers and other racialized workers in the food system, and people facing food/income insecurity across the country? What are the conditions of possibility that must be explored if these groups are to traverse the cultural, geographical and political divides that currently exist between them?
3. With food sovereignty being primarily scripted as a rural concept, how can it be further taken up by urbanites who are facing particular, geographically specific challenges, but who could also benefit from the radical transformation of the food system? In particular, what role might urban agriculture groups play in this regard?

4. How can political education for food sovereignty best be advanced within and beyond Canadian farming circles, as a means to link agrarian struggles with broader efforts to overcome capitalist exploitation, patriarchy, settler colonialism and systemic racism? How specifically must existing approaches to radical pedagogy be adapted to promote food sovereignty, agroecology and counterhegemony in this country?

5. What are possible routes through which food sovereignty can effectively be institutionalized in a policy landscape that features siloed institutions and jurisdictional complexities? How can transformed food and agricultural policies be paired with changes to, for example, immigration and labour laws, income support programs, legislation and programs affecting Indigenous communities, and democratic and electoral systems?

To be sure, exploring these questions will continue to raise dialectical tensions such as those I have highlighted in this chapter. This is to be expected. These issues are complex, and the processes to be analyzed are multifaceted and constantly evolving. The benefit of taking Gramsci’s ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’ dialectic to heart though, is that it encourages one to not solely focus on the seemingly insurmountable challenges associated with changing the food system and fighting climate change; there is also the implicit need to imagine the alternative hegemony that could be established by a new historic bloc, and to focus on the forms of praxis that can make such supposedly improbable goals a reality. Within that space of tension, between pessimism and optimism, seems like a good place to start.
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