The Global Politics of Local Food: Community Resistance and Resilience in Durban, South Africa

Noah Zerbe

Noah Zerbe is associate professor and chair of politics at Humboldt State University.

"For many people, eating particular foods serves not only as a fulfilling experience, but also as a liberating one—an added way of making some kind of declaration. Consumption, then, is at the same time a form of self-declaration and of communication" (Mintz 1996, 13).

Introduction: An Emergent Double Movement

The dramatic expansion of neoliberalism since the late 1970s has generated considerable resistance. In Polanyi's (1944 [2001], 130) description, "The dynamics of modern society [were] governed by a double movement: the market expanded continuously but this movement was met by a countermovement checking to expansion in definite directions. Vital though such a countermovement was for the production of society, in the last analysis it was incompatible with the self-regulation of the market, and this with the market system itself." For Polanyi, the double movement was the necessary result of the contradictory forces of economic liberalism, which places the self-regulating market at the center of social reproduction, and demands for social protections against the worst excesses of the market system

itself. The interplay between these two demands, expressed by competing class interests in society, results in a continuous give-and-take between regulation and deregulation.

Neoliberalism's expansive reach marked the end of the twentieth century as the pinnacle of market society. However neoliberalism's subjugation of the most basic elements of social reproduction to market forces provoked a sharp response from individuals seeking to insulate social relationships from the worst excesses of the market. Around the world, the double movement took different forms. In some countries, students mobilized around the right to education and the need to keep schools and universities affordable. In others, demands for "living wages" or shorter working hours were expressed. More recently, calls to re-regulate the banking sector in the United States and Europe in response to the global financial crisis can be seen as part of this movement.

In South Africa, the double movement took several forms. As the post-apartheid South African government increasingly adopted market-based approaches to development, subjecting greater and greater portions of social reproduction to the market system, civil society responded. Disparate responses were unified in their opposition to the linked processes of financialization, privatization, and commodification at the heart of the neoliberal project. From the Anti-Eviction Campaign in the Cape Flats to the Soweto Electricity Crisis Commission, anti-privatization struggles erupted across South Africa in the early 2000s (cf., Bond, Desai, and Ngwane 2012, Bond 2010, Bond and McInnes 2006, Bond 2005, McKinley 2005, Ngwane 2003). These struggles, organized around the collective identity of "the poors" (Desai 2002) served as a new form of social mobilization, supplementing the racial and gendered dynamics of exclusion that characterized both apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

The unification of the poors around access to the most basic elements of social reproduction—housing, water, electricity, and so on—mobilized the anti-apartheid movement's legacy in support of

a continued struggle against economic inequality. Thus, as Richard Mokolo, the leader of the Crisis Water Committee in Orange Farm outside Johannesburg, put it, "Privatization is the new kind of apartheid. Apartheid separated whites from blacks. Privatization separates the rich from the poor" (Smith, 2008). In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, such a framing made sense. Since the end of apartheid and the transition to nonracial democracy in 1994, economic inequality in South Africa has increased dramatically. While the racialized system of political rule has been dismantled, the country's current economic system has brought with it sharp increases in inequality. In 1994, South Africa's Gini index stood at 59.3. By 2005, it had increased to 65.0, making South Africa one of the most unequal societies in the world—far more unequal (at least economically) than it was under apartheid. While a new group of black elites had emerged, the vast majority of South Africa's black and Asian population continues to slide deeper into poverty. Beginning in the anti-eviction struggles in Chatsworth, "Identities were being rethought in the context of struggle and the bearers of these identities were no respecters of authority. The particular kind of identity congealing in this moment had no grand ideological preconditions and so could not be co-opted by government sloganeering. It was organized around the primary realization that resistance had to be offered against the hostilities being visited on the poor" (Desai 2002, 44). From Chatsworth to Soweto, from Khayelitsha to Talfelsig, from Orange Farm to Kennedy Road, the poors mobilized to resist the commodification of social reproduction under neoliberalism. Opposition to privatization became the focus of struggle in South Africa, with new movements drawing on the rich tradition of anti-apartheid activism, perhaps most directly in the form of the rent strikes of the 1980s, when striking South Africans refused to pay rents, fees, and fines imposed by the apartheid state.

In the context of post-apartheid inequality, the poors mobilized around an effort to "recommon the commons." In 2002, a R10 (Ten Rand) campaign was launched in Durban. Protestors marched on municipal offices, demanding to pay back rent on matchbox houses owned by the city government. From their perspective, R10 was a "fair price" to pay for monthly services. They also demanded that the R10 payment settle all arrears claimed by the government. Similar marches were soon mobilized in other South African cities. This campaign echoed historical demands for "just prices" by British peasants during the transition to capitalism in an effort to establish a "moral economy" of provision, where protestors would break into bakeries, take the bread they needed for subsistence, and leave what they felt was a fair or "just price" for the goods they took (Thompson 1966).

The South African government has attempted to portray popular resistance by the poors as emblematic of a longstanding "culture of nonpayment." Under apartheid, black South Africans often mobilized nonpayment campaigns, in which they would refuse to pay for state services both to protest unequal provision of state services and to weaken the apartheid state. However, while nonpayment certainly was (and I would argue continues to be) a symbolic statement of resistance associated originally with the anti-apartheid movement and later with the anti-privatization movement, the decision not to pay for services today is not always a voluntary one. As Desai concludes, "Contrary to government accusations, there was no 'culture of nonpayment.' There was simply no income in these areas. What had taken root was an economics of nonpayment" (Desai 2002, 17).

More importantly, though, efforts by the post-apartheid government to reframe the question of nonpayment are linked to a redeployment of the concept of citizenship. In both the energy and water sectors, the South African government attempted to frame nonpayment as a violation of an implied social contract between the state and the people. In doing so, it reframed citizenship in neoliberal terms. In the context of the imposition of prepaid meters for water and electricity, von Schnitzler (2008, 907) notes that, "Central to this process [of deploying the new meter technologies] was the constitution of citizens as fiscal subjects overlaying the dominant

rights-based discourse of the anti-apartheid movement, allied to a quest to 'normalise' the fiscal relationship between the state and its citizens in the aftermath of apartheid. The act of payment, and thus of recognizing one's obligation to the state, came to be seen as a prerequisite for inclusion within the new political community." Rights, in other words, belonged to individuals insofar as they paid the requisite fees; citizenship became conflated with consumerism.

Food Sovereignty in eThekwini

Beyond the collective identity expressed by the poors in the context of struggles to assert the right to housing, electricity, and water, a nascent parallel movement can be seen in the area of food sovereignty. These calls, articulated in South Africa by various groups, have been received unevenly by local governments. While various metro governments, including the Durban Metro Council and the Johannesburg Metro Council, have expressed rhetorical support for urban agriculture in South Africa, there has been little real, material support. Globally, an estimated 800 million people are engaged in urban food production. Approximately one-quarter of these people are commercial producers growing for market, and approximately 150 million are full-time farmers (Sawio and Spies 1999, 3). Yet in eThekwini[1] and elsewhere, urban farmers generally operate on the periphery of the formal sector, rarely benefitting from whatever marginal state support may be available, and (more often) being subject to harassment for their informal activities.

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, a wide variety of urban food systems are in play. In Dar es Salaam, urban agriculture receives the rhetorical support of government without the material commitment necessary to support it (Jacobi, Amend and Kiango

2000). In Accra and Cairo urban agriculture is limited in scope and receives little attention from the state (Greenberg 2006, 12). In Nairobi, official government policy prohibits urban food production but regulations are rarely enforced and urban agriculture is common (Foeken and Mwangi 2000). In Zimbabwe, historical support for urban agriculture in the 1980s gave way to prohibition in the 1990s as Zimbabwe African National Union-Popular Front sought to undermine urban-based support for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (Greenberg 2006).

To date, few studies of urban agriculture in South Africa have been undertaken, and the scale and scope of the phenomenon remains contested. The scale of urban food production in the eThekwini metropolitan area is likely larger than elsewhere in South Africa, given the city's large peri-urban area and its favorable growing climate. A study conducted in the early 1990s estimated that between one-quarter and one-third of the households in peri-urban areas were engaged in some cultivation (Rogerson 1996, 9), though the degree to which this contributed to household nutrition and subsistence was not estimated. Rhetorically, the post-apartheid City Government has expressed its enthusiastic support for urban agriculture. Community Councilors and City Parks officials repeatedly emphasize that urban agriculture is an important avenue for sustainable development and expanded livelihood opportunities for Durban's poor. However, competing demands for both land and government policy focus have often resulted in the marginalization of local food production. In particular, the tradeoff between expanding land for the development of housing and maintaining vacant land for food production poses great difficulty in a city where an estimated 800,000 people reside in tenuous informal settlements.

The South African case also complicates the food security discourse. While South Africa has sufficient resources to satisfy food demand through a combination of trade and domestic production, access to sufficient food resources remains difficult in many households. Echoing Sen's entitlement theory, Greenberg (2006) notes,

---

[1] eThekwini was created in 2000 when Durban and seven local councils were amalgamated into a single metropolitan area. Home to approximately 3.5 million people and covering an area of 2,300 km^2, eThekwiwni includes the city of Durban and surrounding towns, the largest of which (by population) are Umlazi, Chatsworth, Kwa-Mashu, Phoenix, Inanda, Ntuzuma, Pinetown, and Mpumalanga.

Although South Africa can be said to be food secure at a national level through a combination of domestic production and trade, this does not hold at the local level in marginal parts of the country. These 'marginal' parts coincide with the ghettos (rural and urban) created by the segregationist system of apartheid and continue to undermine the economic and social, if not the political structure of the country. What is more, there is further differentiation at a household level and even within households, so that those without effective command over resources may be food insecure even in areas where there is local level security.

A food sovereignty framework addresses this shortcoming by asserting the right of communities to "healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and to define their own food and agriculture systems" (Forum for Food Sovereignty in Sélingué, Mali, 27 February 2007). The food sovereignty framework centers primarily on the right of local, smallholder producers. Indeed, the Mali Declaration continues, "Food sovereignty prioritizes local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability."

But such a definition prioritizes rural communities and producers and leaves unresolved the role of urban producers in a wider food sovereignty movement. In the context of post-apartheid eThekwini, for example, alternative networks of food production have developed around three key frameworks: formal community gardens, informal 'guerilla' gardens, and various initiatives by the Durban Botanical Gardens in support of both formal and informal urban food production. The degree to which they might fit into a food sovereignty framework is unclear.

Formal community gardens encompass those activities which seek to use urban spaces for the production of food consistent with the wishes of those who own or control the land. This includes various initiatives, from the increasingly popular mixed-use of private gardens by the privileged upper middle class, for whom growing their own food is often viewed as a legitimation of progressive politics, to the formal allocation of unused urban lots by the city government to poor communities for local food production. It also includes initiatives by the city government to expand local food production in spaces owned by the city itself, such as the City Hall Food Garden program, which retasked the gardens in front of City Hall from growing flowers and ornamental plants to the production of vegetables for free cultivation by the city's homeless population and the Tata Old Age Home located nearby.

Informal, or guerilla, gardening is distinguished from more formal community garden initiatives by the way in which the land itself is acquired. Unlike community gardens, which are used with the permission of the land's owners, guerilla gardeners illegally grow food on vacant property without legal authority. Interviews with guerilla gardeners suggest a wide variety of motivations, ranging from anarcho-syndicalist political views encompassing the wholesale rejection of notions of ownership and private property, to more basic and limited claims of social justice and necessity. In either case, the production of food in informal gardens is, by definition, less secure and more tenuous.

Finally, the Durban Botanical Gardens has a variety of programs intended to support formal and informal food production within the urban and peri-urban area of the city. It has, for example, initiated a Food Garden Network program which helps neighborhood communities secure land for small-scale sustainable gardens, with the Botanical Garden providing technical support and education for gardeners. The Durban Botanical Garden programs might thus be seen as an effort to mediate the formal and informal approaches to urban food production embodied in the other two frameworks.

While there appears to be a growing local food movement in eThekwini, interviews with participants in the local food movement itself highlight several important limits to the movement. The South African Constitution provides an expansive set of rights to all South African citizens. Clause 27(1)(b) of the South African Bill of Rights provides for a basic right for all South Africans to health care, social security, and sufficient food and water. However, unlike in the area of water, electricity, and housing, discussed above, there has been surprisingly little mobilization around access to food. Consequently, questions of food production and of lack of access to food have failed to become politicized in the same way that lack of access to other basic factors of social reproduction have. Progressive leadership in Durban appears to have been directed towards other struggles, and food remains an issue considered separately from land, at least in the urban sphere. There is, in short, no well-mobilized constituency expressing demand for food.

Land, of course, remains a central area of struggle, particularly in rural South Africa. Yet even there, the land question is operationalized as a question of redressing the legacies—particularly the economic legacies—of apartheid. Frustration has mounted as a consequence of the slow pace of reform, largely a consequence of the neoliberal approach to land reform (Moyo 2008). However, even in the rural areas, the question of land access has not generally been articulated in the terms of food sovereignty (See, for example, Wesso 2011).

With the exception of the staff of the Durban Botanical Gardens, demands for access to food in eThekwini have generally been framed in the most conservative manner possible, using a food security rather than a food sovereignty framework. Due to this conservative framing, the question of access to food remains largely disconnected from broader struggles around access to the commons, including—importantly—questions of land tenure and security and access to water, seed, and other inputs. Rather than asserting rights to land and food under the progressive framework of food sovereignty, as has been the case in countries like

Brazil and India, food access has not been made an area of political struggle in urban South Africa.

Conclusion

This paper represents an initial attempt to draw out preliminary findings from research conducted in the summer of 2011 in Durban/eThekwini, South Africa. Based on extensive interviews, I found that mobilization around the idea of food sovereignty was not particularly well developed. This was surprising, given the strong level of community mobilization by the poors around other anti-privatization initiatives, including water and electricity service delivery as well as housing. Apart from the staff of the Durban Botanical Garden, urban food producers operating in both the formal and informal sector continued to frame their message in terms of "food security" and a "constitutional right to food." The broader framing encouraged by a food sovereignty lens was never clearly articulated.

Equally surprising given the high level of social mobilization and the widespread interest in local food was the fact that the question of access to food had not become a salient factor in political mobilization in eThekwini. In the United States, by contrast, emergent discussions under the rubric of food justice have focused on linking consideration of school food, community gardens and farms, and other local food movements to broader considerations of climate change, globalization, and the U.S. Farm Bill, to name a few. This does not appear to be the case in Durban, where community mobilization is perhaps more squarely focused on other concerns. Nevertheless, the history of community activism and mobilization around other areas unified by a common opposition to the expansion of neoliberalism suggests a possible path forward for food sovereignty in eThekwini.

References

Bond, P. 2005. "Globalization/Commodification or Deglobalization/Decommodification in Urban South Africa," *Policy Studies*. 26, no. 3/4: 337-358.

_____, A. Desai, and T. Ngwane. 2002. "Uneven and Combined Marxism within South Africa's Urban Social Movements," *LINKS: International Journal of Socialist Renewal*. February. Available online at: http://links.org.au/node/2757.

_____ and P. McInnes. 2006. "Decommodifying Electricity in Postaparthied Johannesburg," in *Contesting Neoliberalism: Urban Frontiers*, Helga Leithner and Jamie Peck, eds. New York: Gilford, 157-179.

_____ with T. Ngwane. 2010. "Community Resistance to Energy Privatization in South Africa," in *Sparking a Worldwide Energy Revolution: Social Struggles in the Transition to a Post-Petrol World*, Kolya Abramsky, ed. Oakland, AK Press.

Declaration of Nyéléni. 2007. Forum for Food Sovereignty. Available online at: http://www.foodsovereignty.org/

Desai, A. 2002. *We Are the Poors: Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa.* New York: Monthly Review Press.

Foeken, D, and A. Mwangi. 2000. "Increasing Food Security Through Urban Farming in Nairobi," in *Growing Cities, Growing Food: Urban Agriculture on the Policy Agenda*, ed. Nico Bakker, et al., eds. Feldafing, Germany: Food and Agriculture Development Centre, 303-328.

Greenberg, S. 2006. *Urban Food Politics, Welfare, and Resistance: A Cast Study of the Southern Johannesburg Metro.* Durban: Center for Civil Society, Unveristy of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

Jacobi, P., J. Amend and S. Kiango. 2000. "Urban Agriculture in Dar es Salaam: Providing for an Indespensible Part of the Diet," in *Growing Cities, Growing Food: Urban Agriculture on the Policy Agenda*, by Nico Bakker, et al., eds., Feldafing, Germany: Food and Agriculture Development Centre, 257-284.

McKinley, D. T. 2005. "The Struggle Against Water Privatization in South Africa," in *Reclaiming Public Water: Achievements, Struggles and Visions from Around the World,* Brid Brennean, et al., eds. Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 181-189.

Mintz, S. 1996. *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Power, and the Past*. Boston: Beacon.

Moyo, S. 2008. *African land Questions, Agrarian Transitions and the State: Contradictions of Neo-liberal Land Reforms.* Senegal: CODESRIA Working Paper Series. Available online at: http://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/Sam_Moyo.pdf

Ngwane, T. 2003. "Sparks in the Townships," *New Left Review*, 22 July-August: 37-56.

Polanyi, K. 1944 [2001]. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time.* Boston: Beacon.

Rogerson, C. M. 1996. "Urban Poverty and the Informal Economy in South Africa's

Economic Heartland," *Environment and Urbanization* 6 no. 1: 167-181.

Sawio, C., and L. Spies. 1999. "Towards the Establishment of a Development and Research/Training Network on Urban Agriculture for East and Southern Africa," *Urban Agriculture Notes*.
Available online at:
http://www.cityfarmer.org/UANESA.html#UANESA

Smith, G. 2008. "South Africa's Water Woes Echo Global Problems." *Earth Island Journal*, no. Autumn.

Thompson, E. P. 1966. *The Making of the English Working Class.* London: Vintage.

Von Schnitzler, A. 2008. "Citizenship Prepaid: Water, Calculability and Techno-Politics in South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 34 no. 4: 899-917.

Wesso, R. 2011. "South African Food Sovereignty Campaigners Move to Occupy Land." *Pambazuka*. August 18. Available online at:
http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/75772.