What We Talk About
When We Talk About Hunger:
An Etymology of Food Policy

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Anyone researching the history of agriculture and development must be struck by how frequently one encounters warnings not to take words at face value. Policy discourses, without exception, rely on deceptively reified vocabularies, but in the case of the politics of food the problem is magnified by the number of disciplines contending for authority and the speed with which certainties are overturned. In 1913, British economist Alexander Loveday observed that the best way to track debates on famine was to follow the dictionary: “The history of famines in India is largely the story of how the meaning of that word has been modified through the force of economic transition and the perfection of administrative organization.”

Dealing with this linguistic quicksand was one of the challenges of writing The Hungry World. In the 1950s and ‘60s development experts still used a terminology of peasants, villages, and land tenure recognizable to readers of Anna

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Karenina, but for policymakers it was a radical break from the petrified language of diplomacy. In 1957, Senator John F. Kennedy hoped rural development might provide an “imaginative, progressive, and practical” approach to nationalism that went “beyond the vocabulary of the Cold War.” My best guide to this crossover lexicon was *Keywords*, an excellent book by Raymond Williams, a glossary of terms that convey “a field of meanings” often used in one sense by specialists and in quite another in general discussion.

One of my objectives was to show how certain quantitative indicators—such as the calorie or demographic transition—served as what historians of technology call a “boundary object,” a concept standing at an intersection between science and policy defining goals and opportunities in each sphere. But there are words and phrases that have this function, too. Timothy Mitchell describes how “the economy,” coined in the 1930s, demarcated a domain of social activity governed by empirical laws. It required a combination of declining imperial ambitions and U-boat warfare before experts or the public could even conceive of a managed, contained sphere called the economy. But

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3 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford, 1983).
once they did, “Economics provided a method of setting limits to democratic practice, and maintaining them.”

For the historian, newly coined words and phrases are things to watch. Firstly, they place a date on novel convergences of thought and practice, and secondly, in their first clumsy uses they expose suppositions and associations later smoothed over by convention and repetition. Take for instance, the term “agricultural sector,” which we might simply take to mean that portion of the economy devoted to growing things. Its first appeared in an American newspaper on August 11, 1934, in a *New York Times* article by Wolf Ladejinsky summarizing his masters’ thesis on Soviet collective farms. Later famous as Mr. Land Reform, Ladejinsky provides a human link between debates on race, class, and farming in Europe in the 1930s and Vietnam-era schemes for remaking rural Asia.

First used in Germany and the Soviet Union, agricultural sector denoted a portion of the economy that required special handling by the state. For Nazi theorists, the countryside “the life source of the people and the breeding ground of the armed

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5 See for instance, Carl E. Pletch, “The Three Worlds or the Division of Social Scientific Labor Circa 1950-1975,” *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 23 (October 1981) 4: 565-590; or Gilbert Rist,

forces" needed paternalistic interventions to preserve it from the ravages of commerce, for the Soviets, it represented a zone stubbornly resistant to central management, prone to rightist deviation and values inimical to social progress. When the term came into use in the later New Deal it echoed both interpretations: agriculture could thrive only under a carefully constructed regime of subsidies, price floors, and production quotas largely because it responded poorly or perversely to the laws and incentives that drove the manufacturing sector. This was a distinctly Keynesian appreciation of the rural problem applied globally as a Cold War strategy. In this sense, the sudden decline in references after 1989 is revealing. In neoliberal theory there is no separate sector; agribusiness is just business.

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Jumping ahead to the 1950s, we can use the N-gram viewer to visualize the rise and decline of fashions in rural development. The Truman administration’s first enthusiasm took the form of integrated irrigation/river development schemes modeled on the TVA. The Chinese revolution spurred innovations in land reform and village or community development. The 1950s and 1960s were the golden age of United States foreign aid, an era of rising budgets and projects tied to an urgent counterinsurgency mission. While the Soviets displayed their engineering prowess in steel mills and sports arenas, US experts waded into rice paddies with tube wells and bags of fertilizer.

The Green Revolution did not start as a solution to the population explosion, but it came to be justified that way after the fact. After détente and Vietnam the Nixon administration scaled back the Cold War in the global South along with the volume of aid. Development was now constrained by a discourse of Malthusian limits described successively as
overpopulation, the energy crisis, and global warming. The objective of rural reform in this context was national self-sufficiency in food. India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia mounted mass campaigns to restrict births, grow more food, and alter diets to meet the crisis.

“Food self-sufficiency” was the culmination of centralized national planning applied to agriculture. It described both a strategy for rural revival and a solution to the hunger problem, conceptualized in the 1960s and 1970s as famine. It meant the widespread adoption of new seed technology, price controls, and subsidized fertilizer and irrigation. India created a national system of granaries to stockpile food against future emergencies. Self-sufficiency drives gave modernizing populist dictators—Marcos, Indira Gandhi, Suharto, Ayub Khan—opportunities to build rural power bases. This was also part of its appeal for donor nations, still concerned about stability in Asia but rapidly exhausting their aid budgets.

The phrase “food security” emerged in the 1970s to describe an internationalized, market-based alternative to self-sufficiency. Initially, it too was cast in Malthusian terms.
The October 1974 meeting of the FAO recommended creating a global Food Security Council to manage the movement of grain reserves worldwide to address both famine and chronic malnutrition. As the Economist explained, the plan shifted resources “not from rich to poor but from rich to rich”; it was “essentially a means of relieving the Americans of their sole responsibility for keeping the world’s grain reserves.” The proposal did not survive, but the term did. By the 1980s, Ronald Reagan was pushing for a global rollback of food subsidies and quotas, and self-sufficiency was becoming a dirty word. “I understand nations talking about self-sufficiency. It gets their citizens worked up,” explained the head of the American Farm Bureau, but “we ought to be looking at comparative advantage.”

Food security is a more common phrase, more prevalent in public discourse than self-sufficiency ever was. To many ears it sounds like a resolute, if vague, appeal on behalf of those who live at the edge of survival, but for others it has more to do with the survival of the Doha round. Agriculture and food are weak points in the neoliberal trade regime. The 2002 Doha

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Development Agenda anticipated growth in trade and incomes except for the poorest nations, which would be hit by the one-two punch of eroding protection and rising prices of imported food. Disputes over agriculture disrupted two WTO ministerial meetings in 2008. In the wake of the price spike that year, the G-8 pledged to put food security “at the core of the international agenda.” But they were not quick enough. Thailand, Vietnam, and Kenya banned exports. The FAO found two thirds of developing countries had taken non-market based actions—subidies, price controls, trade limits—to support farmers. That was when the Economist noted an ominous change in vocabulary:

Perhaps the most striking trend is the move from ‘food security’ towards ‘food self-sufficiency’ as a goal of national policy. . . . This shift towards self-sufficiency coincides with growing scepticism about world trade, examples of price controls and more extensive government involvement. The FAO has even suggested the shift may amount to “a change of paradigm” in farming.

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Critics on the Left also discerned a neoliberal agenda salted away within food security. In 2001, Food First, Friends of the Earth, Public Citizen and other NGOs meeting in Manila issued a manifesto calling for “food sovereignty.” The term quickly became a rallying cry for an international movement against the globalism of food security and the nationalism of self-sufficiency. Couched in a language of rights and ethics, it is anti-GMO, anti-WTO, pro-organic, pro-local, and for the autonomy of farmers and consumers without much detail on how conflicts between goals, if any, might be sorted.

“There’s a term called food sovereignty that’s growing in popularity, about farmers’ rights,” Hannah Moloney, a urban farmer in Hobart, Australia explained a couple weeks ago. “Sovereignty is about giving farmers freedom in the food cycle, the choice of what crops they grow, what seeds are grown, how it’s distributed, how to get a fair price.” The term has shown up in protests against NAFTA and the WTO in Mexico and Venezuela; there is an Alliance for

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12 Our World is Not for Sale: Priority to Peoples’ Food Sovereignty : WTO out of Food and Agriculture (Bangkok: Focus on the Global South, 2001).

Food Sovereignty in Africa; and food sovereignty is guaranteed in Nepal’s 2007 constitution.¹⁴

Given this brief history of the food policy nomenclature, I can offer a few words of advice for advocates of food sovereignty. Firstly, stop explaining what it means. The terms with legs have been the ones that conceal an elaborate politico-scientific agenda behind a neutral front. Say too much and it becomes a slogan. Secondly, invent quantitative indicators. With food issues, as with all questions of development and rights, it is important to replace political debate with simplified metrics.¹⁵ Finally, incrementalism is not enough. Giving farmers autonomy, making diets healthier or more affordable—worthy as those goals are—does not advance the narrative of crises and revolutions that traditionally surrounds food issues. Too much talk about individual choices and small gains might change the paradigm.
