
“A PLACE OF PEACE”: FOOD SOVEREIGNTY MOVEMENTS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR FOOD PEACE

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Food as relationship

I start with the thesis that food is a set of relationships rather than a commodity. (Pollan 2006) Food is a relationship with the plants, animals, and fungi of natural world, it is a relationship with other people, and, because my work is in area of theology and religious studies, I also see food as a relationship with transcendence—with meaning, values, love, and the divine. (Wirzba 2011) Food is a set of relationships, but those relationships are distorted by forms of injustice: extractive forms of agriculture, factory farming, exploitative labor practices, and unequal food distribution. These are symptoms of the structural violence that damages ecological and social relationships. If food is fundamentally a relationship, but one that has been distorted by injustice, then the restoration of that relationship is a form of peace building. The Earth Charter defines peace as “the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part” (Earth Charter 2023; see also Akers Hanson and Campbell 2023). This definition of peace echoes

what the Hebrew scriptures refer to as *shalom* or positive peace. *Shalom* is not merely the absence of conflict, but rather the presence of justice, right relations, the equitable distribution of resources, and a preferential option for the poor (Bahnson and Wirzba 2012).

Here I want to explore how food sovereignty movements might contribute to the cultivation of a positive peace or *shalom* in the agri-food system. According to the Declaration of Nyéléni, developed in Mali in 2007 and published by the international peasant organization La Via Campesina, “Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.” (La Via Campesina 2007) Movements for food sovereignty can now be found all over the world (Patel 2012), but here I’ll discuss three examples, at different geographical locations and scales. In order to consider how they build peace through collective action, I’m applying a theoretical framework borrowed from Monica White’s book *Freedom Farmers* (2018), which examines the twentieth-century development of Black farming co-operatives in the southern U.S. Archival and ethnographic research led White to develop a framework that she calls “collective agency and community resilience” (CACR). CACR captures how, under conditions of social segregation and economic exploitation, Black farmers were able to build “sustainable communities through alternative community structures” that were “created to meet community needs—whether social, political, or economic.” (White 2018, 6-7) According to White, Black farming cooperatives enacted CACR through three primary strategies: (1) commons as praxis, (2) prefigurative politics, and (3) economic autonomy. I’ll return to an explanation of these key strategies after reviewing some examples.

Freedom Farm Cooperative, Sunflower county, MS

Fannie Lou Hamer was born to a sharecropper family in Mississippi and entered politics in 1962 when she tried to register to vote. She experienced economic retribution as well as police brutality for her activism but achieved national recognition when she famously testified at the 1964 Democratic National Convention as a representative of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. She was also famous for singing during civil rights marches and rallies, especially, “This Little Light of Mine.” In 1967, she began organizing the Freedom Farm Cooperative (FFC) as an “antipoverty strategy” (White 2018, 65) for displaced sharecroppers in Sunflower county, Mississippi.



Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial

The mechanization of agriculture in the 1960s had forced former sharecroppers and tenant farmers off the land. With no employment options and limited access to emergency food, Sunflower county's Black population had high rates of malnutrition and diet-related disease and "the highest infant mortality rates in the country." (White 2018, 68) Hamer's solution was to organize community members into a "long-term strategy of self-sufficiency" through the Freedom Farm. In her words, "Down where we are, food is used as a political weapon. But if you have a pig in your backyard, if you have some vegetables in your garden, you can feed yourself and your family, and nobody can push you around. If we have something like some pigs and some gardens and a few things like that, even if we have no jobs, we can eat and we can look after our families." Membership was open to anyone, but the leadership was "black and local." At its peak, the co-op was collectively owned by 1500 member families working over 600 acres. (White 2018, 73) In addition to subsistence crops grown in community gardens and cash crops of cotton, soy, and wheat, the co-op included a catfish pond and a pig bank, where families could take out a loan of piglets, raise and breed them, and later pay off their loan by returning two piglets to the bank. FFC also included affordable housing, a Head Start program, a sewing cooperative, and a tool bank. (White 2018, 72)

A series of natural disasters began the decline of the cooperative, and, as external funding dried up, Hamer's own illness and death put a definitive end to the Freedom Farm. Despite

its failure, for a time this radical experiment, in Monica White's words, "created an oasis of self-reliance and self-determination in a landscape of oppression maintained in part by deprivation ... [it] was a manifestation of ... the capacity of a community to come together for the provision of food." (White 2018, 87)

The Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil (1984-present day)

My second example comes from Latin America. In 1984, as Brazil was emerging from decades of military rule, a grassroots movement began to demand the redistribution of land. Landless workers in southern Brazil occupied unused farmland on abandoned estates and began to work the land together. (Stronzake and Wolford 2016) Taking advantage of a 1964 law that requires farmland to be "productive," they applied for the government to recognize their settlement, re-appropriate the land from the inactive owner, and provide it for their legal use. (Froio 2023; Meek and Tarlau 2020) Known as the Landless Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra or MST), this movement has spread over the last 40 years, and "researchers estimate that 460,000 families now live in encampments and settlements started by the movement, suggesting an informal membership approaching nearly two million people, or almost 1 percent of Brazil's population." (Nicas 2023) While it can take years for the government to recognize the settlements, 60% of the land occupations have been legalized, and these communities now receive government funding for education and health care services. The movement has also become a major food producer, providing not only subsistence crops for the occupying families, but also organic produce sold in cities.

While the movement began with the goal of land reform and redistribution, they have expanded into a wide-reaching vision of eco-socialism (Meek and Tarlau 2020) that recognizes the connections between social injustice and environmental degradation. (Stronzake and Wolford 2016) They have developed a robust educational system for rural youth based on Paulo Freire's pedagogy of liberation and incorporating experiential learning in agroecological methods. (Meek and Tarlau 2020) Closely allied with La Via Campesina, they are leading the struggle for climate justice through a grassroots transformation of the agri-food system that prioritizes the knowledge and skills of workers and peasants; an ongoing dialogue with the needs of the land (Stronzake and Wolford 2016); and new forms of social organization through collective action. (Carter 2010) The MST vision has even attracted urban workers to move to rural areas: "The city is not good for us," said Marclésio Teles, 35, a coffee picker standing outside the shack he built for his family of five, his disabled daughter in a wheelchair beside him. "A place like this is a place of peace." (Quoted in Nicas 2023)

MST's methods of land seizure and their Marxist ideology have provoked controversy and, at times, violent backlash from corporate landowners. An estimated 300 members have been killed at protests or occupations over the last 40 years. (Froio 2023) But under recently re-elected President Lula, MST once again has an ally; during his first term, he increased funding for education, healthcare, and social services on the settlements.

Washington Bottoms Community Garden in Memphis, TN (2013-2016)

My final example is from my hometown. In the summer of 2013, a group of ten unhoused people founded the Washington Bottoms Garden (WB) on an abandoned lot in Memphis. They were members of an organization called HOPE, Homeless Organizing for Power and Equality, formed underneath the umbrella of the Mid-South Peace and Justice center. In addition to advocating for better emergency shelter and long-term housing options, HOPE members identified the common challenge of finding “affordable, healthy food.” (French 2014) This conversation led to the formation of a “garden crew” to plant and care for a community garden on vacant land. Their early efforts to grow vegetables, herbs, and flowers began to attract the attention of low-income neighbors, mostly recent immigrants from Vietnam and Mexico, who offered support, added their own garden plots, and “even let the group [run a hose] to the garden from a household water line.” (Ibid.)



Washington Bottoms Garden Crew

By November 2014, all but two of the original ten members of the garden crew had transitioned into stable housing. The Washington Bottoms site had become a beautiful and safe gathering place for the neighborhood. Once common solicitation and drug use were decreasing, and neighbors sent their children to the garden to work and play. (Philips 2016) HOPE held meetings, cookouts, and holiday celebrations. (Washington Bottoms Garden Facebook) They fundraised \$600 to purchase a movie screen and projector and began holding regular movie nights. They installed a little free library, a greenhouse, planted a permaculture forest and a sensory garden, and made their pathways wheelchair accessible. One member told a journalist that the project helped de-stigmatize people experiencing homelessness. "We're your neighbors," she said. "We're people just like you. We realize the interconnectivity of all life. We may not have a place to stay at the moment but we want a better world for all and we're not afraid to get our hands dirty and sweat making it happen. In fact, we enjoy it and would love for you to join us." (Quoted in French 2014)



Washington Bottoms Family Event

This collective action to create direct food access for unhoused people exceeded their expectations. "When we started, the land was completely littered with trash and junk car parts and broken glass and couches. There were a couple nights there that we heard gunshots. There was a history of gang violence right on that corner, and the surrounding apartments were mostly minorities living at a level of poverty," said HOPE garden crew member Dallas Holland. "And then one day when we were out there, I heard laughing and kids running around and music. We were blowing giant bubbles with a bubble gun, and it was the moment that it hit me that this was more amazing than we ever meant it to be."

(Quoted in Philips 2016) The project came to an end in March 2016, when the new owners of the lot erected a fence. The garden crew was given one week to remove their property. They held a farewell party, salvaged what they could of plants and structures, and made plans to continue gardening at new locations.

Conclusion

What do these examples tell us about how food sovereignty movements contribute to peace building? First, they all connect people with the land (see Shiva 2013) for the basic purpose of meeting food needs, with MST and WB additionally using sustainable and agroecological methods. This approach to the land exemplifies the strategy that Monica White calls “commons as praxis” – recognizing the earth as our common home and source of food, organizing people through cooperative growing methods, and responsibly using shared resources. They secure the environmental dimension of peace building through the care and regeneration of the ecosystem.

Second, they practice democratic forms of decision-making that empower marginalized people – displaced sharecroppers, landless workers, and unhoused people. They recognize that knowledge comes from lived experience and that displaced people are experts in injustice. They form a collective identity with the power or agency to challenge unjust systems and work together to meet their own needs. They thereby practice what White calls “prefigurative politics” – anticipating a more just and democratic world and bringing into being through shared decision-making – and lay the foundation for the social and political dimensions of peace.

Third, to varying degrees, they practice the strategy White names as “economic autonomy” through grassroots fundraising and cooperative enterprises that amplify their economic power and build wealth within the community. This strategy can most clearly be seen in MST, which has successfully built networks for sales, distribution, and export of their produce. Their co-operative business enterprises generate profit for their members and model an alternative to extractive forms of global capitalism. They thereby enhance the economic dimension of peace.

Lastly, it is worth noting that they all engage in nonviolent methods of direct action, including confrontation with systems of power, for instance, in occupying vacant land. Martin Luther King, Jr., referred to this confrontation as building “creative tension” (King 1963) and theologian

Walter Wink describes it as the “third way” of nonviolence – neither passive acceptance of oppression nor violent retribution, but a way of confronting injustice by insisting on human dignity. (Wink 2003) Nonviolent direct action sometimes provokes a violent response; however, these movements do not withdraw from the world but remain engaged with the world as it is. They each seek the conditions of human flourishing through collective action centered on rebuilding relationships through food. Together they witness to the potential of food sovereignty movements to envision and enact a “food peace” that prioritizes resilience, dignity, freedom, and hope for a more livable future.

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