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Feeding "the commons": rethinking food rights through indigenous ontologies

Giovanna Micarelli

Department of Anthropology, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombia

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to open possible new domains for thinking the relationship between commons and food rights by trying to respond to the challenges of alternative ways of experiencing humans-nature interdependence. The idea of a self-standing individual separated from nature – which underpins both the economicist view of "common goods" as resources, and the Western definition of human rights as something owed to people – not only prevents us from seeing what is at play in countless local struggles worldwide, but it also limits the possibilities of a plural redefinition of food rights. In order to let alternative rationalities emerge, it is necessary to set aside the onto-epistemological framework that sees society as separated from nature, body from mind, subject from object, and the individual from the collectivity. By approaching food commons through the lens of indigenous senses of co-belonging among people, land, and food expressed in relational ontologies, my intention is to bypass both the resource-based, and the sociocentric view of the commons, and see them as *life made in common*. Finally, I look at the possibilities offered by indigenous relationality to expand notions of food sovereignty and decolonize food rights.

KEYWORDS

The commons; indigenous ontologies; food rights; food sovereignty

Increasingly located at the heart of global social and environmental struggles, a myriad of social movements organizing to defend water, seeds, and landscapes, reinvent local food systems, protect biodiversity, and reclaim local knowledge are building a critical paradigm to respond to escalating privatization and dispossession of shared resources (Bollier and Hekfrich 2012; Harvey 2004; McDermott 2014; Patel 2009). Challenging the view of the economy, development, and democracy promoted by market and state, these movements establish a new political discourse on the conditions necessary to promote social justice, sustainability, and a worthy life for all (De Angelis 2010), a discourse that "[disarticulates] property rights while re-connecting what is legal to what is (illegal but perceived as) legitimate and fair" (Marella 2012, 3). Community defense of the commons often mobilizes unique perceptions of land and territory, human dignity, development, and well-being, suggesting that it is not just a struggle for resources, but a struggle over meaning. In order to make those rationalities emerge it is timely to call into question the ontological assumption of a self-standing individual separated from nature that

CONTACT Giovanna Micarelli gmicarelli@javeriana.edu.co

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underpins both the view of the commons as shared resources, and the conventional definition of human rights as something owed to people. The purpose of this article is to try to respond to the challenges of non-dualistic ontologies to broach possible new domains for rethinking the relationship between the commons and food rights. Such ontological perspectives reveal the commons as emerging co-production of human-world relations, thus raising the question of the nature of food as a substance, or as a relationship.

According to De Angelis (2010, n.p), the conceptualization of the commons involves three things at the same time: first, some sort of common pool of resources managed by a community of reference; second, the communities who share these resources and who define the rules according to which they are accessed and used; third, and most importantly, the social process that creates and reproduces the commons: the generative process of "commoning." Attention to how these three elements intertwine led Linebaugh (2008, 279) to affirm:

> To speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst—the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, an activity, rather than as a noun, a substantive.

Jurist Stefano Rodotà (2012) goes a step further by defining the commons as those goods that enable the full realization of the fundamental rights of individuals, and for this reason they cannot be regarded as an object of the market. To define the commons not from its natural quality, but from the purpose it enables – the exercise of fundamental human rights – involves a disarticulation of the subject/object dichotomy on which both the notion of common goods as shared resources, and conventional human rights hinge. Marella adds that: "In the epistemological framework of the subject/object dichotomy the common goods are usually located within the latter end as objects. An alternative solution for commons may be to turn 'the object' into a legal person, i.e. into 'the legal subject'" (2016, n.p). The legal standing recently granted to the Whanganui River of New Zealand, the Vilcabamba River of Ecuador, the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers of India, and the Atrato and Magdalena Rivers of Colombia, among others, reveals a fundamental shift from a view of nature as property toward the recognition of the interrelated value of social systems and ecosystems on the basis of their life-sustaining interdependence. Yet, these achievements have been generally premised on the view that nature has rights, just as human beings have, so disguising the old dichotomy under a holistic cloak. Even if groundbreaking in the current state of escalating cultural and environmental rights violations, to call to indigenous wisdom for promoting the Rights of Nature is a missed opportunity. After all, the economicist view of the commons as resources, and the anthropomorphized view of Nature, are two sides of the same ontological coin (Anker 2017; Vargas Roncancio 2017). A closer, and more generous attention to indigenous claims that articulate environmental protection as the *defense of life* opens a new path for bringing the commons to bear on a plural redefinition of human-nature rights. But to that end, it is necessary to momentarily setting aside any assumptions of what "the commons" are. As Esteva (2014, 1) points out: "[t]he diversity of the so-called commons requires a radical departure from any assumption of the universality of the concept."

In this article, I open a debate on the word itself and its meaning by turning the attention to the kind of experience of the so-called "commons," the particular patterns of multispecies world-making (Haraway 2008; Stewart 2010), and the senses of self, community, and worth that are enabled by indigenous non-dualistic relational ontologies. By approaching food commons through the lens of indigenous senses of co-belonging among people, land, and food, my intention is to bypass both the resource-based (i.e. the commons as resources), and the sociocentric (the commons as social processes) view of the commons, and see them as *life made in common*. Finally, I direct this discussion to food sovereignty and, particularly, to the recent recognition by social movements of the inseparability between the commons and food sovereignty. I argue that a deeper engagement with indigenous cosmological imaginations offers an opportunity for expanding food sovereignty's anticolonial struggle and for pluralizing food rights.

Commoning in the pluriverse

Acknowledging the "uncommon" (Blaser and De la Cadena 2017) between a world built on the separation between subject and object, nature and society, matter and mind, and a world that is not so constructed, is the starting point for exploring the values and practices of being and doing in common enabled by non-dualistic onto-epistemological perspectives. To that end, it is timely to reconsider a range of received assumptions that have framed the analysis of the commons. Next, a set of theories allows us to take a deeper look into entangled human-world co-production, from where to call into question the nature of the commons and its three constitutive elements, namely, resources, communities, and social processes.

A way to situate people plus ecosystems as the relevant level of analysis is through a series of current debates – broadly labeled "ontological turn" – aimed at problematizing what we assume as "real." These debates have paid particular attention to how non-dualistic ontologies cut against the common-sense distinction between human and non-human matter (Blaser 2013; De la Cadena 2010, 2015; Descola 2013; Descola and Pálsson 1996; Haraway 2008; Viveiros de Castro 1998). The human-world entanglements fostered by these other modes of being have been described as "relational ontologies" (Blaser 2013; Escobar 2010; De la Cadena 2010, 2015). Different ontological perspectives are not just different *representations* of the same world, but constructions through which different worlds come into existence. In relational ontologies entities are not self-standing ontological units, but they exist only thanks to the relationship they maintain with each other; as entities emerge from such relationship, they "are intra-related rather than inter-related" (De la Cadena 2015, 33; Barad 2007).

The consideration of the culturally specific ways in which relationships are established between people and things also informs anthropological analyses of the notion of property in non-western societies. In the introduction to a collected volume on property in indigenous Amazonia Brightman, Fausto, and Grotti point out that: "[. . .] rather than humans merely holding preferential rights over tracts of land understood as a natural object, ownership proliferates and binds places together through relations between nonhuman persons, with whom humans must interact in a variety of ways, including hunting, gardening and shamanism" (Brightman, Fausto, and Grotti 2016, 22). Occupation of natural spaces is not necessarily equivalent to property or tenure; rather,

people belong to the land. If people may articulate their rights over garden or forest plots[1] in terms of ownership, ownership takes the form of a network of relationships: "[e]ach category of space … has the form of a community of beings related together as owners and owned" (Gow 1991, 80). These rationales suggest that analysis of the commons should not be limited to problem-solving strategies, the work of social institutions, or even to social processes, but it must also take the creation of onto-epistemological frames of reference into account. Also, they urge us to rethink the limits and contours of "communities," and rather see them as creations that bind together not only human, but also non-human subjects and places.

I use the term "community" cautiously to describe a collectivity bounded by social presence, identification, and relations of mutual obligation and reciprocity, without implying circumscription or coherence. In fact, any use of the term "community" must consider the possible frictions between exogenous and endogenous definitions, the heterogeneity of interests that it may involve, and issues of coercion and dispute that may be linked to the symbolic domain of communities. In other words, community is "a process of ongoing and never fully achieved communication" (Nancy 1991, 35). Community is something that has to be explained rather than being taken as a fact and treated as a source of explanation itself.

A way to address this issue has been to highlight the constitutive role of learning in processes of identity formation, focusing on how people negotiate meaning through interaction in "communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991). Communities of practice "are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor" (Wenger 2007, n.p.). Through participation in a community of practice, people come to "share an understanding concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities" (Lave and Wenger 1991, 98). We can see communities taking shape as its members learn how to act in common (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2006). On this account, commoning is not just a rule-generated social practice; it is also a creative practice that doesn't take community as a given, but that actually helps making community through processes of selection and negotiation of meaning.

As is well known, Ostrom (1998, 2000) identified two types of rational agents in a given population: *conditional cooperators* (norm users) and *rational egoists* (individuals who maximize their own self-interest). But in contrast to Ostrom collective action depends on more than just a structure of norms: it also depends on a structure of feelings shaped by shared emotional connections in which solidarity and reciprocity play a key role. In this regard, interdisciplinary studies in psychology and anthropology offer a third type beside the two posited by Ostrom: that of *mutualistic collaborator* (Tomasello et al. 2012). According to these studies, human cooperativeness is a combination of innate and learned behavior, and it comprises social-cognitive skills that emerge from human interdependent life forms, thus revealing the limitation of a rational-choice approach grounded in Western ideas of rationality, in which it is rational to want more of a good, not less, and in which rationality excludes sentiments (Acheson 2011). On this point, ethnography-based anthropological theory has long argued that rationality cannot be equated with value-free facts but is embedded in worlds of values (Overing 1985; Perry and Bloch 1989). For many non-Western societies, morality cannot be seen as a domain separate from knowledge, and

learning to master emotion is considered "part and parcel of the process for acquiring 'thought'" (Overing 1985, 12). Moreover, since cognitive processes do not act in isolation, and thinking, as all behavior, is a blend of different aspects of the self, the emphasis on reason is inaccurate, and intelligibility of behavior should unfold through sensitivity to a broader spectrum of activity. As theories of situated cognition have shown, human cognitive activity is profoundly social and embodied (Hutchins 1995). Therefore, the analysis of the theories deployed by social actors must take place within their particular sociocultural and moral universes, avoiding the canons of Western rationality based on such dichotomies as reason and sentiments, mind and body, subjectivity and objectivity (Latour 1993; Santos and Meneses 2020; Walsh 2007).

An additional argument – first made by Bateson in the *Ecology of Mind* (1972) – is that cognitive phenomena are interdependent with the environments in which cognitive processes operate. From a phenomenological perspective, Maturana and Varela (1987, 11) propose to see knowledge and cognition "not as a representation of the world "out there," but rather as an ongoing bringing forth of a world through the process of living itself." These ideas were further developed by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991, 150) who use the term "enaction" to argue "that cognition is not the representation of a pre-given world by a pre-given mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs." A similar alternative to dualism is offered by Ingold, who argues that human beings are simultaneously constituted "both as organisms within systems of ecological relations, and as persons within systems of social relations" (Ingold 2000, 3).[2] Through place-naming, topographic writing, material culture, and productive practices, knowledge and memory come to be inscribed into the landscape (Basso 1996). Senses of places are a model of, and for, community, and conceptions of wisdom, morals, and the sacred are inextricably entwined with the landscape (Feld and Basso 1997).

Local movements defending the commons provide an eloquent example of how the mobilization of different values assigned to place is a key aspect of people's strategies of resistance and resurgence against dispossession (Escobar 2001; Leff et al. 2002). As argued by political ecology, environmental conflicts are conflicts on valuation; they express the discrepancy and incommensurability of different languages of valuation of the natural environment. Communities' valuations conceive the environment as a source of livelihood, community, knowledge, and identity, and in so doing, they resist the semantic hegemony that defines value in exclusively monetary terms. What they demand is value-pluralism (Martínez-Alier, Munda, and O'Neill 1998; Martínez-Alier 2002). These observations can be taken further if instead of seeing value as an attribute of "objects" other than the "subject" that evaluates them, we see value as emerging from an inherently co-produced socionatural "intra-relationship" (De la Cadena 2015). Value is how people represent the importance of the socionatural construction of which they are a part, which they are responsible to sustain. Value than, is not disjointed from values: both value and values establish what counts in particular orders of worth, encompassing ontological, ecological, social, and moral explanations. Communities' valuations of the "commons" and *commoning* are thus deeply embedded in the manifold ways in which the natural environment is constitutive of people's experience of themselves and others, and come to embody a community's life project.

A possible intercultural translation of commoning is "*comunalidad*" ("commonality"), a concept introduced by indigenous thinkers Floriberto Díaz and Jaime Martínez Luna, of Mixe and Zapotec ethnicity respectively. *Comunalidad* refers to "both a collection of practices formed as creative adaptations of old traditions to resist old and new colonialisms, and a mental space, a horizon of intelligibility: how you see and experience the world as a *We*" (Esteva 2012, n.p.). The principle of *comunalidad* becomes a source of emancipation, as well as of organization, to fight against an economic and political system predicated on ferocious privatization, environmental degradation, extreme inequality, and emptied human rights, themselves the byproduct of the Western dualistic ontology and its foundational civilizatory myth. These struggles for autonomy often embody an ontological clash (Blaser 2013); if they defend conceptions of life and worth that are not necessarily expressed in terms of human rights, is largely because conventional human rights are rooted in, and universalize, the ontological assumption of a self-standing individual separated from nature. As it has been rightly stated: "[w]ith the criticism of the hegemonic conception of human rights, what is at stake is a battle for the meaning of the human being and human dignity" (Aguiló Bonet 2009, 202; Santos 2012).

Food in indigenous ontologies

The theoretical steppingstones set down so far are meant to introduce the following discussion of the place of food in indigenous onto-epistemologies. In 2017–2018, as part of a comparative research project on the relationship between food sovereignty and the commons,[3] I engaged in collaborative ethnography with indigenous people living in the municipality of Leticia (Colombian Amazonia), a multiethnic region where I have been working since 1996. The Amazonas research team consisted of Lidia Rodriguez and Yolanda Andoque, indigenous women of Nonuya and Andoke ethnicity respectively, Jair Agga, a young Uitoto-Murui man, and myself, an Italian woman.[4] Research addressed the meanings and practices associated with food, food sovereignty, and the commons through a dialogic and intercultural ethnographic approach that included participation in, and learning of, food practices, conversations, life histories, interviews, and self-ethnography.[5] We worked with both rural, and urban indigenous population mostly belonging to a supra-ethnic cultural complex known as People of the Center,[6] and with Tikuna, Yukuna, and Cubeo.

Research initially addressed such food commons as water, seeds, biodiverse landscapes, and knowledge. Yet, very soon we realized that people didn't seem to find the concept of common goods[7] relevant and tended to dismiss it. They agreed that water, seeds, and landscapes can be used by everyone since no one, individually, has an exclusive right to them, but they resisted conceiving these resources as *goods*. On the other hand, not only the leaders, but also indigenous individuals in general, immediately related to food sovereignty, which they associated to territorial sovereignty and to the possibility to produce and consume "our own food" according to autonomous choices. These issues led straight to the question: what is food for indigenous communities?

A shared idea among Amazonian indigenous people is that the human self is not given, but it is gradually and laboriously produced. Rather than a natural species or a fixed attribute, humanity is achieved through the cultivation of a distinctive human viewpoint, which lies not in the soul, but in the specificity of bodies.[8] The human body is

itself a fragile construction incessantly prone to disintegration that must be maintained through intentional and constant processes of "fabrication" (Descola and Pálsson 1996; McCallum 2001; Rival 2005; Viveiros de Castro 1987, 1998). According to Viveiros de Castro (1987, 31):

> [S]uch fabrication consists of [...] a systematic set of interventions on the substances that communicate the body with the world: body fluids, food, emetics, tobacco, oils and vegetable dyes. The bodily mutations thus produced are the cause and the instrument of transformations in terms of social identity. *This means that an ontological distinction between [...] physiological processes and sociological processes is not possible at the level of the individual.* [My translation and emphasis]

Food is a key element in such processes. Diet – the set of food restrictions, and the quality of what is considered to be "proper food" – achieves the production of bodies endowed with human distinctive social and moral dispositions. Diet starts before birth, it goes along with the different stages of life, and it varies according to a person's gender, social position, and health condition. Diet is also associated to specific tasks such as opening a garden, hunting, or sustaining the formation of the fetus during pregnancy. Among the Muinane, the first solid food given to a child is a type of cassava bread[9] which is considered to be distinctive of one's ethnic group. The cassava bread is "conjured"[10] so that the person will always prefer it to other foods. In this way, his or her social identity is doubly shaped by tangible and intangible processes affecting the body-mind. Food and eating are seen to directly affect cognitive faculties and complying with a strict diet is a requirement in the process of learning expert cultural knowledge (Micarelli 2015b). A Yucuna elder explains: "A boy who prepares to become a healer has a certain diet. A boy who prepares to be a singer has a certain diet. A boy who is going to prepare to become master of *maloca* has a certain diet ... the same for girls" (Yucuna elder, personal communication, 2018.)

The idea that the body is not an inert support on which the social is deposited, but that the formation of the body, social identity, and intellectual capacities are one and the same process frequently appears in the evaluation of dietary changes and in the ideal attachment to traditional food. According to an elder Uitoto woman, for instance, young people will never "think as an Indian" because they eat rice instead of manioc and other tubers grown by women in their gardens (personal communication). Similarly, a Yucuna elder established a sort of equivalence between food and knowledge, claiming that eating canned food "blocks" knowledge acquisition in children: "they cannot memorize, they cannot grasp knowledge, because food is blocked [i.e. canned]; it will not develop the body and intelligence *of the indigenous body*" (personal communication, emphasis added). In contrast, food resulting from people's reciprocal and knowledgeable transformation of the environment produces bodies endowed with moral, social, and intellectual abilities that are a sign of true human identity. For Lidia, the reason why she was able to maintain her cultural knowledge while living many years among the white people was because she was fed by her grandmother according to her lineage's tradition as a child. Cultural knowledge, incorporated through food and affections, is reawakened when she cultivates and shares the products of her garden (personal communication). To be able to share a great variety of crops also establishes the power and wealth of a person, "just like a lot of money allows you to manage a lot of people" (Uitoto man, personal

communication, 2018). Literally, we are what we eat: a social ontology (who we are as social beings), an epistemology (what we learn), and even a pedagogy (how we learn) are connected to food practices.

In these perspectives, food is seemingly a substance that gives knowledge and moral qualities to human people. However, we must avoid turning food into an object. In Amerindian multiple ontologies, categories are highly unstable, and things may possess an "occult life" as intentional agents (Santos-Granero 2009b). A variety of plants are said to be persons are are endowed with emotions and intentionality; if startled by a human person they wither and die, so people speak softly when they come close to them (Nonuya and Bora women, personal communication, 2018).[11] Similar relations to plants are found in other regions of Amazonia. Canela women and men living in the Maranhão State of Brazil consider their crops to be, literally, children, and they cultivate nurturing, loving relationships with plant kin, friends and lovers (Miller 2019). The relation between people and cultivated plants is often expressed through the language of kinship. Bora, Nonuya, Andoke, Uitoto women light fires in the gardens to heat the crops, just like they heat the baby in the womb with the steam of cooking pots, to make the crops "recognize their mother" (personal communications). Among the Runacuna of the Ecuadorian Amazon, women feed the cassava stakes they planted with a red drink made of *achiote* (*Bixa orellana*) in order to make them grow. When they give their plants a drink of *achiote*, they rub their own chin with the red drink, "so that the manioc drinks our blood" (Guzmán Gallegos 1997, 76), in so doing establishing a relation of consubstantiality between women and plants. The following Wari´ story of the Maize Spirit shows that eating can be a sympathetic act that pleases the "thing" consumed, rather a subject, who reciprocates the eater with an abundant crop.

> Long ago, a man was walking to his field carrying a basket of maize seeds to plant. A maize kernel fell to the ground on the path. The man did not see it and went on. The maize seed began to cry like a child. Another man came along and found it crying on the ground. He picked it up and ate it. In doing so, he saved it, showing that he felt sympathy [*xiram pa'*] for it. The man who ate the seed planted his field and it yielded great quantities of maize. The man who had left the seed on the ground planted his field, but nothing grew (Conklin 1995, 85)

The social dynamics of food production, exchange, and consumption are then also the means to enter into relation with the different sorts of subjects or persons, human and non-human, that inhabit the world. This multiplicity of subjects – people-as-food, and food who becomes people by means of cultivation and commensality – includes spiritual entities who are considered to be the "masters," or "mothers" of resources. Usually associated with particular landmarks of the territory such as rock formations, *salados*,[12] or springs, these entities regulate the availability of the so-called resources. People must negotiate with these powerful entities in order to obtain benefits, and in a sort of contractual relation they must give back to nature in cycles of reciprocity.[13] Reciprocity, which is not altruism, but an obligation, is the means for sustaining the continuous circulation of vital energy that makes possible life, health, and abundance for all. Reciprocity is mainly evidenced in dance rituals that are enacted with the purpose of "curing the territory" through actions of prevention and protections from illness.

In a conception of the world that establishes the interdependence between human and non-human beings, it is the constant relationship between both that enables reproduction and permanence (Acosta Márquez 2014). Even if "nature" is peopled by other-than-human subjects, the territory is not conceived as a self-standing physical space external to humans, but as the very self, "one more organ of the human body" (Muinane man, personal communication). To cure the territory and the human body are one and the same thing. A Yucuna elder explains: "Food belongs to the earth, and we as people also belong to the earth. We sow the earth and the earth helps maintain our crops, and when the earth bears fruit we eat it. The essence of all the fruit and game that we eat becomes the human body. That's why we speak of the earth as a mother" (personal communication).

These perspectives reveal a notion of territory that exceeds in many ways the dominant Western definitions of the concept. While in Western definitions the territory is a delimited area or portion of the geographical space owned by a subject who exercises sovereignty in an exclusive way, in indigenous worldviews the territory is a web of relations in which the human being is just a part. So, space is not an ontological given, but is the result of the life-sustaining relationships of all its constituents. This suggests that if indigenous people do not relate to the concept of "common goods" is because their understandings exceed the view of resources as "goods" or "objects."[14] To express their relationship with so-called resources, they speak instead of *common good*. When asked what that means for them they broach mainly three things: the territory is common good because it is where *life* develops; rituals are also common good because they instantiate spiritual reciprocity that is indispensable to *life* and health; the third and most important common good of all is knowledge. Knowledge doesn't refer simply to acquired skills and information, but to the "knowledge of *life*"; in the People of the Center's epistemologies a body of teachings that form "real people" with the habits, dispositions and affects that are the source of true human identity. The knowledge of life vests people with the responsibility to maintain life, seen as a balanced web of relationships among all its constituents. The responsible care of such a web is the source from which not only humanity and society, but the whole cosmos, are continuously recreated: it is *life made in common*. People's duty to safeguard life for this and future generation is also the source of rights. Similar views lie at the core of the definitions of well-being – *buen vivir*, living well – mobilized by a myriad of indigenous communities to fight against neoliberal development, mining, dams, oil drilling, deforestation, and so on (Escobar 2010, 39).

A relational approach to food sovereignty

In order to bring the above discussion to bear on the reconceptualization of food rights, I engage in dialogue with food sovereignty, a multidimensional concept through which social movements frame their struggles for more democratic food regimes (Edelman et al. 2014; Fairbairn 2010; Patel 2009; Trauger 2017). The concept of food sovereignty was coined in 1996 by La Via Campesina as a response against the expansion of the neoliberal food system and the limitations of the food security model adopted by FAO. After growing demands by social movements, only in 2012 did FAO agree to begin discussions about food sovereignty as an alternative paradigm to food security. In 2014, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food helped to bring attention to food sovereignty when he declared: "understood as a requirement for democracy in the food systems,

which would imply the possibility for communities to choose which food systems to depend on and how to reshape those systems, *food sovereignty is a condition for the full realization of the right to food*" (De Schutter 2014, 20; emphasis added).

From its beginnings, food sovereignty encompassed different dimensions that ranged from the authority and power of the State to define its food policies against third countries, to people's right to self-determination with regard to food systems. Over the years, intercultural dialogue, at a juncture marked by the dynamics of the global economy and the consequent weakening of state sovereignty, gradually shifted the meaning and scope of food sovereignty toward local, self-dependent, participatory, shared, biodiverse, and culturally appropriate production and consumption (LVC 2003; Agarwal 2014; Wittman 2011). Against the increasing privatization of food resources, just recently food sovereignty movements have located the commons at the core of food rights (LVC 2016). While the FAO Committee of World Food Security acknowledged, in 2009, the status of food security as a global public good, the commons counter-narrative sidesteps the private/public divide; in doing so, they challenge some basic tenets of Western modernity (Vivero Pol 2013), revealing alternative ways to value the relationship between food, land, and communities.

Two important benchmarks are worth highlighting in this regard. First, social movements have placed peasant subsistence networks and knowledge systems at the core of food sovereignty. This point was well summarized by Mexican advocate Silvia Ribero when she said: "those who really have the necessary knowledge for food sovereignty are the peasants, the small scale fisherfolk, the herdspeople, the people who can work and live in the forest" (Nyéleni. 2007, n.p.). The shift of focus from peasants as producers of food to peasants as knowledgeable managers of agroecological systems shows that are not just biodiverse food systems to be defended, but entire cultural systems. Second, the focus shifted from land to territory (LVC 1996). La Via Campesina insists that food sovereignty is the right of small farmers to produce food in their own territories; it entails "sustainable care and use of land, water, and seeds in order to preserve biodiversity;" it is based on "farming people's right to freely use and protect genetic resources they have developed," "to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity," and "to defend their territories from the actions of transnational corporations." (Nyéleni. 2007, n.p.). Locating the commons at the core of food rights reveals the transforming pathway undertaken by food sovereignty movements. Here the territory is not simply a delimited geographical space, but a sociohistorical construction that incorporates knowledge, worldviews and different forms of collective management developed through time by the communities that inhabit it (Martínez and Rosset 2020). Against the naturalization of the territory as equivalent to the nation-state's territory, food sovereignty's territorial approaches recognize that within, and often across, state borders different territorialities coexist, hence disputing that the exercise of political power over the territory exclusive right of the nation-state.[15] In this way, food sovereignty proponents set the framework for establishing place-based conceptions of rights (Patel 2009; Wittman 2011).

These proposals alter the hegemonic meaning of "sovereignty" but only partially; sovereignty seems to still bear the mark of the modern western legacy of the concept: originally the authority that emanates from a sovereign to exercise power over a defined geographical space. As the Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred (2004) points out, the real decolonization of the notion of sovereignty requires to disconnect its Western roots and

to question an idea of authority modeled in terms of the State. His proposal for rethinking sovereignty starts from a consideration of indigenous conceptions of nature and the natural order, which, he argues, are the basic referents for thinking about power, justice and social relations in indigenous perspectives. Indigenous formulations "build frameworks of respectful coexistence by acknowledging the integrity and autonomy of the various constituent elements of the relationship." (Alfred 2004, 471). Cherokee scholar Jeff Corntassel adds that: "[a]s a refutation to a resource extraction-based economy, Indigenous peoples practice and honor their sustainable relationships. A Cherokee word that describes a sustainable relationship is digadatsele'i or "we belong to each other". Belonging to each other in the broadest sense means that we are accountable and responsible to each other and the natural world" (2012, 96). A Yucuna elder from Colombian Amazonia echoed these views when asked what he meant by "sovereignty" he answered without hesitation: "sovereignty is responsibility!" (personal communication). The unique understandings of sovereignty deployed by indigenous societies expand the meaning of sovereignty beyond the narrow coercive notion of the state, in terms of people's different ontological imaginations of, and engagements with the socio-natural order.

These views clearly inform indigenous notions of food sovereignty. As Daigle (2019, 298) points put, indigenous political, legal, and I would add, cosmological orders "in one way, shape everyday practices of protecting and regenerating Indigenous foodways and, in another way, are simultaneously cultivated through food practices." The Canadian Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty (WGIFS), for instance, states that food sovereignty depends on the interaction of a multitude of natural communities that work together, and it is achieved fundamentally by cultivating the responsibility of nurturing healthy and interdependent relationships with the land, plants and animals. Similar notions are mobilized by indigenous organizations in Colombian Amazonia to question nutrition assistance programs implemented by the State. Indigenous resistances and resurgences reveal that "there is a cosmological clash between a deep understanding of what food sovereignty means in practice for Indigenous peoples, and the kinds of practices of modern liberal democratic capitalist states (Agarwal 2014)" (Grey and Patel 2014, 442). This recognition should inform responsive political action for confronting the food insecurity condition of Latin America's indigenous population, which doubles that of the non-indigenous population (FAO 2015), matching the situation of hunger and malnutrition of indigenous peoples on a global scale (Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous People's Issues 2014). In spite of the fact that indigenous territories maintain the greatest biodiversity of the region, hunger and malnutrition result from a myriad of mutually reinforcing structures of power that are responsible for the dispossession of land and territory, environmental degradation, and the destruction of community-based productive systems and economies.

Conclusions

The recognition that the right of indigenous peoples to food is inseparable from their rights to territories, culture and self-determination is an important step toward a pluralist reconceptualization of the right to food (Cunningham 2013, x). In fact, this issue is not resolved by the notion of cultural acceptability of food, an aspect of

the normative content of the right to food that, nonetheless, doesn't go beyond the recognition of the cultural variability of food habits and preferences.[16] In recent discussions it has been emphasized that cultural acceptability also implies taking into account values not based on nutrition that are associated with food and that contribute to the complete image of the individual and the community (Kuhnlein 2009). But there's more to it once we recognize that for indigenous people the right to food goes *beyond the human*; it is the right of a community of beings bound together through relations of intra-dependence. Food not only shapes distinctively human and social bodies, but also informs a web of life-sustaining exchanges in ways that shun such dichotomies as subject and object, body and mind, nature and society. Likewise, the dialogue with indigenous theorizations suggests that a resource-based definition of the commons cannot be solved by just adding two more elements – communities, and social processes – while leaving untouched the universalizing nature/society binarism that underlies it. In other words, the commons and commoning cannot be understood independently of a social group's unique cosmological and ontological perceptions. In indigenous relational ontologies and their particular ways of imagining reality, the commons dissolve as objects, or even as social systems, and they turn out to be *life made in common*.

In this paper, indigenous senses of co-belonging among people, land, and food provided the opportunity to problematize the basic assumptions that have framed conventional food rights. In this regard, the challenge for an anticolonial research and practice is not to cling to a relativist viewpoint, but to bring the diversity of what it means to be human and have a worthy life at the center of the discussion of rights. At a larger level, ontological radical alterity opens up new possibilities about what *could* exist. As climate change and the current covid-19 pandemic lay bare the fragility of the human, it is urgent to critically engage with these other imaginations to promptly and radically change dominant Western conceptions. Alternatives that value interdependence instead of competition show us a transforming path, perhaps the only ones that can save humanity from imminent destruction.

Notes

1. For instance, palm plots such as caraná, burití or peach palm. Palm plots have been historically managed by indigenous people of the Amazon. Caraná palm's leaves (*Lepidocaryum tenue*) are used for thatching. Burití (*Maurixia flexuosa*), and peach palm (*Bactris gasipaes*) are sources of food.
2. Interesting in this regard are linguistic findings that show a correlation between linguistic diversity and ecological diversity, in which loss in one domain corresponds to loss in the other (Nettle and Romaine 2000).
3. The project "Food Sovereignty and Community's Valuations of Common Goods," was carried out from May 2017 to March 2018 in four regions of Colombia (Nariño, Guajira, Chocó and Amazonas). Luis Alberto Suárez Guava, Claudia Cáceres, Paula Bak and the author (IP) coordinated the activities of local researchers' teams in each region. Financial support was provided by the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (PPTA # 7291).
4. I grew up in Italy, continued my studies in the USA, and moved to South America in 1995. I lived about 10 years in the Peruvian and Colombian Amazonia, before moving to Bogotá.

5. Lidia Rodríguez and Yolanda Andoque developed a method based on self-ethnography that consisted in inquiring on the topics of interest with the people they met on their daily interactions, and at night sharing what they had learned, and recording these conversations.
6. The People of the Center (*Gente de Centro*) is a linguistically diverse, but culturally relatively uniform cluster of ethnic groups including Uitoto Muina-Murui, Bora, Muinane, Miraña, Nonuya, Ocaina, Andoke. It comprises approximately 7,500 individuals living in the Caquetá, Putumayo and Amazon regions of Colombia, and in the northern Amazon region of Peru.
7. *Bienes comunes*, common goods; the term "commons" has no direct translation in Spanish.
8. To critique the substantivist conceptualization of the categories of Nature and Culture, Viveiros de Castro (1998, 470) states that: "Such an ethnographically-based reshuffling of our conceptual schemes leads me to suggest the expression, "multinaturalism", to designate one of the contrastive features of Amerindian thought in relation to Western "multiculturalist" cosmologies. Where the latter are founded on the mutual implication of the unity of nature and the plurality of cultures – the first guaranteed by the objective universality of body and substance, the second generated by the subjective particularity of spirit and meaning – the Amerindian conception would suppose a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 470).
9. Flat manioc bread baked over a clay pan. Different preparations are made from sweet or bitter manioc, using fresh or matured tubers, starch, or a combination of the above, to obtain a bread whose thickness varies from 0.5 to about 5 cm. Other ingredients, such as the roasted seeds of *mocambo* (Theobroma bicolor), can be added to the preparation.
10. *Conjurar, rezar* or *curar* is a speech at that transfers an intention over a substance in order to produce an effect.
11. See also Gagliano (2018).
12. Natural mineral licks.
13. It is important to note that reciprocity is not the only form of interaction that is established between human and non-human beings, and that other patterns, including predation and protection, also exist. Predation is made necessary because the owners of resources are often stingy and do not want to release their assets (Micarelli 2015a). An instantiation of what Santos-Granero (2009a) calls the "political economy of life," predation is not aimed at accumulation, but at feeding the circuits of vital energy.
14. In the classic definition, common resources are characterized by non-exclusivity, that is, they can be exploited by a person or a community since no one individually has an exclusive right; and by divisibility or rivalry, that is, the use of part of the resources by an individual or group subtracts from the amount available to others.
15. In Colombia's peasant uprisings, for instance, peasant movements have been defending the special connection with, and care of, the land as part of their political strategy. They follow the path traced by indigenous and afrodescendant movements, but while for ethnic minorities the right to autonomy is recognized in the legal framework, particularly the ILO Convention 169 ratified by most Latin American legislations, peasant movements have to create new institutional arrangements that challenge the idea of sovereignty as emanating from the State. Instances of this are the Peasant Reserve Zones (*Zonas de Reserva Campesina*: ZRCs) in Colombia. First and foremost a tool for the defense of peasant territories against the expansion of *latifundium* in the lack of a proper agrarian reform, ZRCs are undertaking the defense of peasant communities' territoriality as historically shaped forms of social, cultural, economic, and political organization. In so doing, they link a sense of identity to particular agroecological practices. For peasant movements this is a way to guarantee the protection of food-sheds, seed diversity, watersheds, and ultimately food sovereignty.
16. The right to food was recognized in 1948 by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25) and reaffirmed in 1966 by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 11). The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognizes in 1999 that: "The right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman

> and child, alone or in community with others, have physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement. The right to adequate food shall therefore not be interpreted in a narrow or restrictive sense which equates it with a minimum package of calories, proteins and other specific nutrients." "Cultural or consumer acceptability implies the need also to take into account, as far as possible, perceived non-nutrient-based values attached to food and food consumption and informed consumer concerns regarding the nature of accessible food supplies (Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, general comment No. 12 on the right to adequate food, 1999).

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Notes on contributor

Giovanna Micarelli is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana of Bogotá, and collaborator researcher at the Center for Social Studies, University of Coimbra. Since 1995 she has conducted research in Amazonia with the Conibo Shipibo of the Ucayali region (Peru), the Tikuna of the Amacayacu river, and the indigenous peoples belonging to the supra-ethnic cluster People of the Center (Colombia). Her research interests include indigenous critical engagements with development and modernity, the place of social-environmental understandings in the construction and defense of territory, cultural politics in intercultural contexts, and indigenous onto-epistemologies, methodologies and modes of knowing. The most recent extensions of her research focus on food sovereignty, territorial sovereignty and the commons, understood through local onto-epistemologies.

ORCID

Giovanna Micarelli http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8812-1592

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