

## Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

## Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



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Volume 73, printemps 2014

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1025205ar>

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#### Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

#### ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

#### Citer cette note

Sumner, J. (2014). Health, Sustainability, Food Sovereignty and the Future of Food and Farming: Critical Issues in Food Studies / Wenonah Hauter, *Foodopoly: The Battle over the Future of Food and Farming in America* (New York: The New Press 2012) / Rod MacRae and Elisabeth Abergel, eds., *Health and Sustainability in the Canadian Food System: Advocacy and Opportunity for Civil Society* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 2012) / Hannah Wittman, Annette Aurélie Desmarais, and Nettie Wiebe, eds., *Food Sovereignty in Canada: Creating Just and Sustainable Food Systems* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing 2011). *Labour / Le Travail*, 73, 279–300.

## REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

# Health, Sustainability, Food Sovereignty and the Future of Food and Farming: Critical Issues in Food Studies

**Jennifer Sumner**

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LIKE LABOUR STUDIES, FOOD STUDIES is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that operates outside the boundaries of traditional disciplines to investigate specific issues of import in the world today. A recent addition to the interdisciplinary fold, food studies emerged in the 1990s and gained momentum during the last decade with the burgeoning interest in food. Over the years, it has evolved into a “field of research and scholarship that focuses on the web of relations, processes, structures and institutional arrangements that cover human interaction with nature and other humans involving the production, distribution, preparation, consumption and disposal of food.”<sup>1</sup>

Since we all need to eat, food touches us more directly than many other subjects. Food studies makes the most of this fact, using food as both an object of study, and an entrée into larger questions like sustainability, human health,

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1. Mustafa Koç, Jennifer Sumner, and Anthony Winson, eds., *Critical Perspectives in Food Studies* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2012), xii.

globalization, governance, and power. To fully explore these topics, food studies takes a critical stance, not only *vis-à-vis* traditional disciplines, but also with respect to the wider world. This critical stance is in keeping with Kroker's definition of interdisciplinarity as "an active migration beyond the disciplines to a critical encounter with different perspectives," which helps food studies avoid "vacant interdisciplinarity"<sup>2</sup> – a form of inquiry that reinforces the status quo.

It is within this spirit of critical interdisciplinarity that these books situate themselves. Although dealing with different areas of food studies, all three challenge the status quo in terms of perspective, analysis, and conclusions. In addition, they critique neoliberalism, which in terms of food "prioritizes export-oriented production and trade liberalization, international harmonization of regulatory practices and the deepening of transnational capital integration,"<sup>3</sup> with cascading negative consequences that are meticulously described. They also focus to a greater or lesser extent on policy as a vehicle for regime change in the food system. And they all aspire to a more sustainable food system – one that is fairer, cleaner, smaller, safer, and healthier.

## Health, Sustainability and Food

HEALTH IS ONE OF the fastest growing areas of food studies, reflecting some of the most pernicious effects of our current dysfunctional food system. Rod MacRae and Elizabeth Abergel's timely book, *Health and Sustainability in the Canadian Food System: Advocacy and Opportunity for Civil Society*, addresses questions of health through the lens of civil society organizations (csos). Overall, the book aims to identify new ways that civil society actors can influence the evolution of sustainable and health-promoting food systems by playing a role in the developmental stages of policy making, as long as they can identify access points and opportunities when working with a range of other actors. The editors begin with the premise that our food system appears to be "increasingly implicated in creating the conditions compromising human and environmental health," which is "exacerbated by the entrenchment of food and agriculture policy making in ineffective and unresponsive, and somewhat closed, institutional networks."<sup>4</sup> They point to the establishment of a global

2. Arthur Kroker, "Migration from the Disciplines," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 15, no. 3 (1980): 3, 7.

3. Hannah Wittman and Herb Barbolet, "'Super, Natural': The Potential for Food Sovereignty in British Columbia," in Hannah Wittman, Annette Aurélie Desmarais, and Nettie Wiebe, eds., *Food Sovereignty in Canada: Creating Just and Sustainable Food Systems* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2011), 190.

4. Rod MacRae and Elisabeth Abergel, eds., *Health and Sustainability in the Canadian Food System: Advocacy and Opportunity for Civil Society* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012), 1.

food system in a neoliberal era where some states have given up their capacity to determine national priorities because of international trade treaties or have even gone so far as to deregulate their capacity to respond to internal agro-environmental pressures. While this situation clearly highlights gaps in governance at the supra-national level, the editors argue that these very gaps “have opened up new spaces for political involvement by civil society actors eager to advance a fuller set of policy goals and effect change in the food system.”<sup>5</sup>

The editors use CSO to describe “the mix of community-based and environmental groups, farming organizations, and commodity trade associations that might constitute a policy network.”<sup>6</sup> Like many social movements or social-economy organizations, CSOs exhibit a dynamic tension between advocating for social change and filling the gaps in service delivery that states have either ignored or abandoned, thus reinforcing the dominant paradigm. In spite of this tension, and threats of greenwashing and co-optation notwithstanding, the editors contend that spaces exist where many CSOs can operate and unusual alliances are possible. Their key question focuses on how to carry out effective policy making that considers both the values of different stakeholders and a wider agri-environmental vision. To help realize this vision, the book presents exploratory case studies that aim to reveal a new understanding of the relationship between policy making and CSO involvement. This new understanding is vital, given the editors’ contention that current advocacy efforts are generally focused in the wrong places. Their working assumption is that “policy influence can arise from interactions with middle and senior management, and not, on many files, from trying only to influence parliamentarians under traditional rules of political engagement.”<sup>7</sup>

With this in mind, the editors have assembled a cohort of academics with expertise in various fields of agri-environmental policy, beginning with Grace Skogstad, who sets the frame of the book by emphasizing both *policy* paradigms and *governing* paradigms. She proceeds to discuss these paradigms, looking at agri-food policy and the state assistance and market liberal paradigms. She then introduces readers to the evolution of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to a multifunctional paradigm “that explicitly ties public support for agriculture to social and environmental goals, as well as economic ones.”<sup>8</sup> Returning to the Canadian context, she looks at existing policy and governing paradigms, finding that some elements of the multifunctionality paradigm in the guise of food safety and quality policy goals and a

5. MacRae and Abergel, *Health and Sustainability*, 2.

6. MacRae and Abergel, *Health and Sustainability*, 4.

7. MacRae and Abergel, *Health and Sustainability*, 9.

8. Grace Skogard, “Effecting Paradigm Change in the Canadian Agriculture and Food Sector,” in MacRae and Abergel, eds., *Health and Sustainability*, 18.

more environmentally sustainable food supply system have gained a higher priority, while the governing paradigm showed no significant shift. Overall, she concludes, the multifunctional paradigm has failed to resonate in Canada for three reasons: Canadian decision makers have not seen the need to construct a new legitimization basis for government support of agriculture, there has been no loss of public support for agriculture, and the pluralisation of the farm community continues. Looking ahead, she points to the steps toward the multifunctionality paradigm being taken by the provinces, and suggests that the marketplace is also a potential arena for consumers to put forward the goals of this paradigm.

Alison Blay-Palmer then lays out the case for creating strong sustainability legislation that borrows Skogstad's multifunctional approach and reinforces it with two other components: the principle of subsidiarity – that is, devolving governance to the most local possible scale – and a robust definition of the precautionary principle. Her goal is to establish a multifunctional macro-regulatory context that would be able to support grassroots environmental innovators. From a food systems perspective, she contends, this would provide the basis of a strong foundation for sustainable food systems. In particular, she aims to explore ways to support civil society innovators who are working to create changes in the food system. Although isolated examples of such innovation exist in Canada, they have difficulty gathering momentum, due to the tentative policy commitment to sustainability.

Mark Winfield brings the perspective of environmental csos to the volume, with a chapter that explores the potential parallels between the experience of environmental policy development in Canada over the last 40 years and the current situation with agriculture and food. In particular, he explores which lessons from the former can be applied by sustainable food advocates and csos to their efforts to push food and agriculture policy toward greater multifunctionality and sustainability. His section on critiques of institutionalized environmental csos is particularly revealing, including an overly instrumental and incremental approach to policy advocacy and the pursuit of short-term results to the detriment of wider goals. In addition, he mentions the reduced capacity of these csos to connect with grass-roots activists and to mobilize wider public concern, as well as an operating model based on policy entrepreneurship that resulted in "the fragmentation of effort, a lack of cohesion, competition for resources and political attention to issue-specific agendas, and at times a preparedness to undermine other organizations' goals to advance one's own."<sup>9</sup> Coupled with the willingness of some environmental csos to publicly praise governments for small incremental changes while ignoring larger destructive policy directions, these critiques point to the reason why the use of governmental divide-and-conquer strategies has been

9. Mark Winfield, "The Experience of Canadian Environmental csos: Thoughts from the Green Side," in MacRae and Abergel, eds., *Health and Sustainability*, 86–87.

“embarrassingly easy.”<sup>10</sup> Winfield concludes that in spite of some success, the overall trajectory of the economy and society continues away from environmental sustainability<sup>11</sup>

Elisabeth Abergel introduces readers to the complexities of biotechnology and food policy and governance through an examination of the Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Committee, created to meet demands for greater transparency in the biotechnology policy-making process. She carefully documents the flawed public consultation process that resulted in a boycott of the Committee’s work by csos. Assessing the actions of a group of pro- and anti-GM activists, she finds that boycotts “constitute a form of negotiation because they mobilize groups and individuals around broad collective norms that are inadequately dealt with by governments.”<sup>12</sup> The boycott was necessary because of the federal government’s commitment to agricultural biotechnology had resulted in decades of policy exercises that were never created to take account of any opposition or to engender deep structural change, resulting in the “biotechnologizing of democracy” instead of the “democratizing of biotechnology.”<sup>13</sup> The outcome of the boycott has been mixed: although it captured attention at the time, it is debatable whether it achieved its aim of promoting parliamentary debate. Abergel argues that the case of the CBAC has far-reaching implications regarding policy making and suggests that the goal of advisory bodies should involve embedding decision making about new technologies in social processes that encourage deliberation and negotiation about their appropriateness.

Rod MacRae, Julia Langer and Vijay Cuddeford open up the question of sustainable pest management and csos, beginning with the statement that “agricultural pesticide use remains a strategic target for environmentalists, as the evidence of harm to ecosystems and human health is well established.”<sup>14</sup> Noting that Canada has been lagging behind many other countries in both reducing the reliance of farmers on pesticides and encouraging agri-environmental performance, they explore the interactions of the main policy actors since the 1980s: pesticide firms, farmers, NGOs, and regulators. Their study reveals “changes in decision making in the federal system and the failure

10. Winfield, “The Experience of Canadian Environmental csos,” 87.

11. Winfield, “The Experience of Canadian Environmental csos,” 87.

12. Elisabeth Abergel, “The Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Committee: Legitimacy, Participation, and Attempts to Improve GE Regulation in Canada,” in MacRae and Abergel, eds., *Health and Sustainability*, 101.

13. Abergel, “Canadian Biotechnology,” 115.

14. Rod MacRae, Julia Langer, and Vijay Cuddeford, “Lessons from Twenty Years of cso Advocacy to Advance Sustainable Pest Management in Canada,” in MacRae and Abergel, eds., *Health and Sustainability*, 127.

of NGOs to fully appreciate some of the new decision-making dynamics.”<sup>15</sup> In essence, most NGOs overestimated what elected politicians could accomplish, while underestimating the increasing role of the bureaucracy. In addition, the consensus achieved by CSOs and the alliances made among a wide variety of organizations failed to affect the policy terrain, although a more mature grouping might have been able to counter the anti-agency perspective of the bureaucrats. The authors conclude that a better understanding of these changes, and a different set of skills, could result in more effective advocacy for sustainable pest management.

Aleck Ostry and Tasnim Nathoo take us through almost a century of breast-feeding policy and practices in Canada, noting at the outset of their chapter that breastfeeding has been demonstrated to be nutritionally superior to any other type of infant food. They review the changing social determinants and patterns of breastfeeding initiation in the country, plus the federal policies to promote the practice. During the first half of the 20th century, breastfeeding declined as formula feeding gained recognition, infant mortality rates dropped, and childbirth moved from the home to the hospital, which gave the medical profession heightened influence over infant feeding regimes. The outcome of this decline, and the resultant loss of skills for successful breast-feeding, meant that by the late 1950s, breastfeeding was “virtually a lost art.”<sup>16</sup> The decline was rapidly reversed in the 1970s, however, as breastfeeding became associated with issues of women’s health promoted by the women’s movement and the natural childbirth movement, backed by a number of new CSOs that championed breastfeeding. This return to breastfeeding occurred within the larger context of boycotts against the unscrupulous marketing of infant formula, particularly by the multinational corporation Nestlé – one of the largest consumer boycotts ever launched. Since the 1990s, they point out, the infant formula industry has become more aggressive in its marketing, targeting mothers directly, while policy initiatives have resulted in a patchwork approach to the promotion of breastfeeding, in spite of CSO lobbying. The authors conclude that the policies most likely to succeed will be those that are grounded in women’s experiences, that take into consideration the wide range of factors influencing breastfeeding practices, and that work in conjunction with sociocultural and political trends.

The interactions between CSOs and the state regarding food security, as exemplified by Canada’s Action Plan for Food Security, is discussed by Mustafa Koç and Japji Anna Bas. In 1996, the World Food Summit (WFS) put forward an action plan for food security that many countries adopted. The WFS plan called for a special role for CSOs, which were identified as principal partners

15. MacRae, Langer, and Cuddeford, “Lessons from Twenty Years,” 130.

16. Alex Ostry and Tasnim Nathoo, “Breastfeeding Promotion and Social Change in Canada: A Review of Ninety Years of Breastfeeding Policy and Practices,” in MacRae and Abergel, eds., *Health and Sustainability*, 156.

and stakeholders. As a result, national consultations led to the adoption of Canada's Action Plan for Food Security in 1998, one of the most comprehensive food policy documents ever produced in this country. It proposed a systemic and multisectoral approach, recognized the roles of different agri-food sectors in terms of food security, and suggested solutions for more democratic governance by including CSOs in the process. Unfortunately, the federal government failed to implement the Action Plan for a number of reasons. First, within the growing neoliberal environment, the Action Plan was largely shaped by international considerations and "ignored unique domestic political challenges."<sup>17</sup> Second, the Action Plan lacked commitment from the broader public and the main actors in the food system. Third, the Action Plan illuminated the limits on civil society input – without adequate financial and human resources, CSOs could not be equal partners in the policy-making process. In the end, the authors argue, the actions of the state corresponded "with the system's needs for accumulation and political legitimation."<sup>18</sup> The lessons for CSOs include reversing the process whereby neoliberal governments use them as an opportunity to download public services while cutting funding for research and advocacy work. In addition, CSO funding must be kept at arm's length from day-to-day government involvement, and these organizations must develop greater capacity "to influence the internal levers of government, whether political or bureaucratic."<sup>19</sup>

Tony Winson, Rod MacRae and Aleck Ostry next introduce us to the complex subject of the obesogenic environment and schools, and question whether CSOs have helped to shift the obesity debate from individual responsibility to structural factors. In particular, they inquire into the role of schools, governments, and CSOs in creating effective change, given the "dramatic increases in obesity over the past decade,"<sup>20</sup> particularly among children, and the emerging recognition of the structural forces causing obesity. Schools provide a primary site of intervention because, the authors report, they can have a powerful influence on children's eating behaviours through cafeterias, tuck shops, and vending machines, not to mention the food available in the surrounding area. As a result, a collection of community activists, parents, teachers, university researchers, and even provincial governments have begun to "remake schools into sites for healthy eating."<sup>21</sup> The role of CSOs appears

17. Mustafa Koç and Japji Anna Bas, "Canada's Action Plan for Food Security: The Interactions between Civil Society and the State to Advance Food Security in Canada," in MacRae and Abergel, eds., *Health and Sustainability*, 193.

18. Koç and Bas, "Canada's Action Plan," 194.

19. Koç and Bas, "Canada's Action Plan," 195.

20. Tony Winson, Rod MacRae and Aleck Ostry, "The Obesogenic Environment and Schools: Have CSOs Played a Role in Shifting the Debate from Individual Responsibility to Structural Factors?" in MacRae and Abergel, eds., *Health and Sustainability*, 205.

21. Winson, MacRae and Ostry, "Obesogenic Environment," 211.

significant, particularly through their engineering of community initiatives to improve student access to healthy foods. The authors warn, however, that lack of joined-up school food policies at all levels of government and the ongoing effect of cutbacks mean that local CSO successes have not been normalized. On an optimistic note, the authors mention the shift from voluntary and/or charitable programming to new models for funding and program delivery, backed by an approach that emphasizes the social determinants of health. They conclude by advocating for “broadly based approaches that attempt to alter the structural upstream environments within which individuals make choices about health.”<sup>22</sup>

José Etcheverry illuminates the intersection of energy and the food system by presenting practical lessons from the renewable energy movement. He argues that adopting the Green Energy and Green Economy Act and implementing feed-in tariffs in the province of Ontario have created a firm foundation for a new energy paradigm based on renewable energy and conservation. Initiatives in this paradigm can be collectively considered “virtual power plants,” which, if well-coordinated and managed, can result in “high reliability, cost-effective operating costs, increased energy security, job creation, new economic opportunities, and clean power for all Ontarians.”<sup>23</sup> After describing the efforts of sustainable energy CSOs, Etcheverry then turns to the alliance of conservationists, urban planners, municipal politicians, and environmental organizations who want to counter the urban sprawl approach to planning, by which “agricultural lands, forests, and wetlands have been consistently obliterated and paved over without much hesitation or afterthought.”<sup>24</sup> As a result of their efforts, the government passed the Places to Grow Act and the Greenbelt Act, both aimed at containing sprawl and preserving farmland. Etcheverry then revisits lessons learned from the sustainable energy CSOs, emphasizing the importance of developing broad coalitions that can muster complementary skills and expertise. Such coalitions can frame environmental problems and solutions in ways that garner public and political support. He adds that coalitions should build alliances with research partners and develop internal organizational capacity, or at the least form partnerships with media experts.

The final chapter in the book, written by Sarah Robicheau, deals with the important question of farm succession and the collaboration between CSOs and government to address this issue. Two important considerations frame her discussion: a swath of farmers is approaching retirement age with no one in place to take over the farm; a new generation of farmers is emerging, many of whom are new to the sector and thus need both training and land. This

22. Winson, MacRae and Ostry, “Obesogenic Environment,” 218.

23. José Etcheverry, “From Green Energy to Smart Growth: Practical Lessons from the Renewable Energy Movement for Agricultural Land Protection and Sustainability Activists,” 231-232.

24. Etcheverry, “From Green Energy,” 232.

group of farmers is “rejecting large-scale industrial methods in favour of a smaller production scale and an approach that works with natural processes in an effort to reduce artificial inputs while feeding the local community.”<sup>25</sup> She then introduces Everdale, a CSO that offers practical educational opportunities for new farmers, and describes how it initiated dialogue with the federal government regarding its succession-related programs. Recognizing the new policy environment, it aimed to influence civil servants involved in the negotiation of program details, not politicians. Although more could have been done, Robicheau concludes that the influence of CSOs like Everdale has helped to make such government policy more broadly applicable, which establishes “a precedent of involvement in the consultation process.”<sup>26</sup>

The editors point out that the case studies in this book tell us a great deal: how to participate more effectively and strategically in policy development, the structure of Canadian policy making itself, and the challenge of moving toward more sustainable and health-promoting food systems. After suggesting a number of courses of action, they conclude that their work suggests that “a very sophisticated symphony approach to governance and instrument choices will be required to create a sustainable and health-promoting food system.”<sup>27</sup>

At first glance, a book that focuses on policy development in the area of health and sustainability might appear dauntingly dry, but as MacRae reminds us, “policy is the set of rules, spoken or unspoken, that determines how things are run.”<sup>28</sup> Understanding those rules – how they are made, how they affect humans and the environment, and how they can be altered – is crucial to changing how our food system is run. One of the enormous contributions of this book is its analysis of the shifting terrain of policy making in Canada, highlighting the move from parliamentarians to civil servants. This knowledge is crucial for anyone looking to change the system by simply lobbying their member of parliament.

## Food Sovereignty

ONE OF THE HOTTEST ITEMS in the food studies lexicon, food sovereignty is a Trojan-horse concept that introduces the right to food into a neoliberal climate that blames individuals for their lack of entrepreneurship if they are

25. Sarah Robicheau, “Helping Good Things Grow: Creating Nurturing Policies and Programs for New Farmers through Civil Society-Government Collaboration,” in MacRae and Abergel, eds., *Health and Sustainability*, 243.

26. Robicheau, “Helping Good Things Grow,” 265.

27. Elisabeth Abergel and Rod MacRae, “Conclusion,” in MacRae and Abergel, eds., *Health and Sustainability*, 278.

28. Rod MacRae, “Food Policy for the Twenty-First Century,” in Mustafa Koç, Jennifer Sumner, and Anthony Winson, eds., *Critical Perspectives in Food Studies* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2012), 310.

hungry. Hannah Whittman, Annette Aurélie Desmarais, and Nettie Wiebe's book, *Food Sovereignty in Canada: Creating Just and Sustainable Food Systems*, follows from their previous publication on food sovereignty in the majority world. The authors describe how the term emerged from the ongoing environmental, social, and economic devastation associated with the global capitalist food system. Introduced in 1996 by the peasant organization La Via Campesina, food sovereignty is broadly defined as "the right of nations and peoples to control their own food systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments."<sup>29</sup> In contrast to food security, which emphasizes access to food while ignoring the power relations embedded within food systems, food sovereignty focuses on the right to food. Born out of struggles for power in the global food system, food sovereignty is "a vision that aims to redress the abuse of the powerless by the powerful, wherever in the food system that abuse may happen."<sup>30</sup>

Nettie Wiebe and Kevin Wipf begin this book with an overview of food sovereignty in Canada. Although often associated with developing countries, food sovereignty applies to developed countries as well. Canada provides an interesting case study, they argue, with its triumphal announcements of increasing food exports contrasting with distressing reports of escalating food bank use, food shortages, and food insecurity. The authors challenge those who eat (that is, all of us) to come to terms with the destruction that the food on our tables brings to communities, environments, farm families, and our physical and cultural health. They also encourage people "to actively engage in the exploration of food sovereignty as a viable and sustainable, life-giving alternative."<sup>31</sup> Wiebe and Wipf suggest that for food sovereignty to flourish in Canada, we would need to develop appropriate strategies aimed at change, based on our unique conditions. Such strategies, however, face a number of challenges. First, Canada does not have a long history of farming before export agriculture was implemented. Second, the rapid industrialization of agriculture has paralleled an equally rapid displacement of farmers, leaving ever fewer people actively growing food. Third, Canada is a very urban country, with over 80 per cent of people living in cities, most of whom have little connection to the production of the food they eat. Fourth, the dominant image of our food system as the breadbasket of the world is dependent on new technologies which, in turn, make us dependent on a few consolidated companies. And, fifth, the aggressive drive to increase Canadian agricultural trade, through such mechanisms as trade treaties, is causing us to lose control of the food sector to foreign and corporate ownership. In the face of such challenges, the authors argue that

29. Nettie Wiebe and Kevin Wipf, "Nurturing Food Sovereignty in Canada," in Whittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe, eds., *Food Sovereignty in Canada*, 4.

30. Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: Markets, Power and the Hidden Battle for the World's Food System* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2007), 302.

31. Wiebe and Wipf, "Nurturing Food Sovereignty," 3.

"achieving food sovereignty in Canada hinges on making some fundamental changes in our domestic and trade policies, our diets, our 'food cultures,' our view of our place in the wider world, and many of our relationships to each other and our environments."<sup>32</sup> They propose that the adoption of a food sovereignty paradigm would entail implementing four policy pillars: incorporating agricultural policy into a broad and comprehensive national food policy, investing in inclusive and bottom-up policy development, entrenching the right to food in the constitution, and orienting new agricultural policy toward local food systems and environmental sustainability. Under such policy, linear food chains would give way to healthy, integrated, just and sustainable food webs featuring complexity, connectivity, and interdependence, while recognizing our fundamental dependence on nature.

Darrin Qualman follows this overview with a devastating description of the current state of agriculture in Canada. Mustering data and facts, he confronts the myth of Canadian agricultural might with the reality of advancing agriculture by destroying farms. With the help of graphs, he explains how Canadian farms may excel in size, productiveness, export orientation, efficiency, and adoption of technology, but they have also been some of the world's least profitable, with net incomes remaining near (or below) zero since 1985. The \$795 billion generated by farm production since that date has not gone to farmers, but to chemical, fertilizer, machinery and petroleum companies, as well as banks. He argues that governments have dealt with this income crisis by denial or distortion, while farmers exist on taxpayer support and off-farm labour. In this dismal scenario of a failing agricultural policy built on "export maximization, productivism, technophilia and input maximization," Qualman sees the logic of food sovereignty reaffirmed.<sup>33</sup> Although Canadian agricultural policy has failed to protect the kind of agriculture that supports families, communities, and the environment, he remains hopeful that the very bleakness of the situation can provide impetus toward a new model for agriculture – food sovereignty – which he believes is key to a farm and food renaissance in Canada.

The next chapter features an interview with two leaders of the National Farmers Union (NFU), the largest direct-membership national farm organization in Canada. The national president and the president of a local chapter of the NFU discuss the challenges and strategies in the bottom-up struggle for food sovereignty. The NFU was a founding member of La Via Campesina and hence a strong proponent of food sovereignty, both within the country and around the world. For the NFU, the concept of food sovereignty involves

the ability of the community – whether it's a nation-state, a province, a local community or even a small organization of farmers – to determine what's appropriate in terms of food production and in terms of social and economic justice that flows from growing food. This

32. Wiebe and Wipf, "Nurturing Food Sovereignty," 7–8.

33. Darrin Qualman, "Advancing Agriculture by Destroying Farms?: The State of Agriculture in Canada," in Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe, eds., *Food Sovereignty in Canada*, 29.

power includes the autonomy to determine what's appropriate in both those areas and also in terms of the broader economic and ecological context.<sup>34</sup>

Although many farmers, particularly those in the Prairies, depend on export agriculture, the food sovereignty perspective entails that trade benefitting Canadian farmers should not harm agricultural producers in other parts of the world. This perspective also encourages supply management systems, which allow farmers to make a decent living, but are under threat from neoliberal trade agreements. They note that a few strategies that improve food sovereignty have been successful but, given the pressures farmers experience – from debt to drought – and the problems associated with developing legislation, very little has been achieved to advance food sovereignty. By fighting rear-guard actions and working from issue to issue in a neoliberal climate, they worry that a comprehensive vision of food sovereignty has yet to be realized. On the positive side, a number of other groups are working toward the same end, such as farming organizations, church groups, NGOs and food movements. To conclude, the interviewees propose that we need four conditions to implement food sovereignty: a cultural shift, a recognition of the importance of rural knowledge, a breakdown of the dichotomy between rural and urban people, and the adoption of a long-term view. In their view, the implementation of food sovereignty would have a positive ripple effect on communities, values, and the environment.

Annette Aurélie Desmarais, Carla Roppel and Diane Martz then turn to the issue of women and agriculture, using the food sovereignty approach to highlight shortcomings in Canadian agricultural policy. According to these authors,

Food sovereignty demands fundamental changes in power relations. It demands equality and the end of all forms of violence against women, and as such it seeks to transform existing unequal gender relations.<sup>35</sup>

Part of this transformation, Desmarais et al. maintain, includes the equal participation of men and women in decision making regarding policy and program development related to food and agriculture. To emphasize this point, they contrast the participation processes in a study they carried out entitled *Farm Women and Canadian Agricultural Policy* with the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's (AAFC) consultation process that led to the Agriculture Policy Framework (APF). They contend that the federal government's "consultation" process for the APF qualified as nominal participation, which merely demonstrates that those in power are "doing something" with specific groups.

34. Terry Boehm and Hilary Moore, interviewed by Naomi Beingessner, "Getting to Food Sovereignty: Grassroots Perspectives from the National Farmers Union," in Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe, eds., *Food Sovereignty in Canada*, 44.

35. Annette Aurélie Desmarais, Carla Roppel and Diane Martz, "Transforming Agriculture: Women Farmers Define a Food Sovereignty Policy for Canada," in Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe, eds., *Food Sovereignty in Canada*, 59.

In contrast, the participatory process in their 2004 study, conducted one year after the APF consultations and consisting of workshops involving 105 women from six provinces, would qualify as transformative, for two reasons. First, the process designers and the participants shared the common interest of empowerment and second, the very process of participation was understood as both a means and an end. Through their participation, the women built a vision for agriculture that rests on four pillars: financial stability, domestic food policy, safe, healthy food and environment, and strengthening the social and community infrastructure. Their comparison of the two types of participation highlights the difference between a food sovereignty approach to policy development and the federal government's neoliberal approach. They see the former grounded in women's daily experiences, addressing the needs of families and communities from a social, cultural, environmental, and economic perspective, while the latter focuses on increasing production for export and favouring agri-business corporations.

The neoliberal approach has also been the impetus for the establishment of Food Secure Canada, a national organization with an ambitious vision: "to create a coherent food movement in Canada that could strengthen local projects and support a national food policy for a just and sustainable food system."<sup>36</sup> Cathleen Kneen provides a history of this umbrella organization that is based on three interlocking commitments: zero hunger, a sustainable food system, and healthy and safe food. In 2011, Food Secure Canada organized the People's Food Policy Project, a cross-country set of kitchen table meetings resulting in the launch of a central policy document, *Resetting the Table: A People's Food Policy for Canada*. Among other things, the document found that the basic problem with our current food system involved treating food as a commodity, not a necessity of life, which made global food and agri-business companies and international food speculators the prime beneficiaries. In order to change this situation, the People's Food Policy Project proposed a number of policy recommendations, such as ensuring proximal food, supporting the shift to ecological production, enacting poverty elimination and prevention programs, creating a food strategy for children, and ensuring that everyone, especially those marginalized by the current system, actively participate in decision making.

Dawn Morrison then introduces readers to Indigenous food sovereignty, based on the responsibilities of Indigenous peoples to uphold their distinct cultures and relationships to the land and food systems. Arguing that the living reality of food sovereignty is not new for Indigenous communities, she describes how over millennia, "Indigenous peoples have developed a wide range

36. Cathleen Kneen, "Food Secure Canada: Where Agriculture, Environment, Health, Food, and Justice Intersect," in Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe, eds., *Food Sovereignty in Canada*, 80.

of traditional harvesting strategies and practices.”<sup>37</sup> The modern concept of Indigenous food sovereignty performs two functions. First, it describes current strategies that enable Indigenous communities to sustain traditional practices, such as hunting, fishing, gathering, farming, and distribution. Second, it offers a framework for understanding and rebuilding the industrial food system into something more just and ecological. For Morrison, Indigenous food systems “include all land, soil, water, air, plants and animals, as well as Indigenous knowledge, wisdom and values.”<sup>38</sup> She contrasts the mechanistic, linear approach of the industrial food system based in the Cartesian worldview of the domination of nature to the ecological approach of Indigenous food systems, backed by Indigenous eco-philosophy, which emphasizes that “humans do not manage the land, but instead can only manage our behaviours in relation to it.”<sup>39</sup> Four main principles guide Indigenous food sovereignty: sacred or divine sovereignty, participation, self-determination, and legislation and policy. Morrison describes some of the challenges facing Indigenous food sovereignty, including physical and emotional stressors, neoclassic economics, the global corporate food system, and current ‘development’ practices. In spite of these challenges, she maintains that Indigenous food sovereignty embodies the kind of framework that outlines ways that members of settler communities can join the bottom-up approach to influencing policy. “Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike must work together to reinforce positive behaviours that build resiliency in ecosystems and communities.”<sup>40</sup>

André Magnan then takes us through the turbulent history of the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB), using a food sovereignty lens to analyze the limits of farmer control. The CWB “was a government-sponsored, farmer-controlled, collective marketing agency for Western Canadian wheat and barley.”<sup>41</sup> As a single-desk seller, it provided farmers with increased stability and market power in the volatile, fiercely competitive global market. The intersection of market power and farmer control inherent in the CWB had made it a crucial aspect of food sovereignty in Canada. Magnan points out that food sovereignty includes the rights of genuinely democratic governments to implement policies that benefit domestic food producers and to regulate markets through such vehicles as supply management and the CWB. In the post-World War II era, Magnan describes how the CWB negotiated and administered massive

37. Dawn Morrison, “Indigenous Food Sovereignty: A Model for Social Learning,” in Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe, eds., *Food Sovereignty in Canada*, 97.

38. Morrison, “Indigenous Food Sovereignty,” 98.

39. Morrison, “Indigenous Food Sovereignty,” 99.

40. Morrison, “Indigenous Food Sovereignty,” 105.

41. André Magnan, “The Limits of Farmer-Control: Food Sovereignty and Conflicts over the Canadian Wheat Board,” in Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe, eds., *Food Sovereignty in Canada*, 114.

grain deals and played a key role in maintaining farm income. During the 1970s, however, this form of state marketing declined, and the new *CWB Act*, passed in 1998, made the Board more democratic, but retained the government's 'power to direct,' which the Harper Conservatives took advantage of by challenging the principle of farmer control through eliminating the *CWB's* monopoly on barley in 2007 (and ending its monopoly on wheat in 2012, with a view to privatizing it by 2016), thus destroying this long-standing pillar of food sovereignty in Canada.

Rachel Engler-Stringer then interweaves a food sovereignty approach with community nutrition, beginning with a description of community nutrition as "a branch of nutrition research and practice that focuses on improving the nutritional health of individuals and groups of people within communities."<sup>42</sup> Many in the field, she reports, understand that community nutrition should focus on the bigger picture of how "public policy and income inequalities impact the nutritional health of communities," particularly because the field has been critiqued for not addressing the root causes of nutritional problems, such as poverty.<sup>43</sup> One of the keys to this larger focus is a more explicit incorporation of food sovereignty principles. Engler-Stringer maintains that, in line with food sovereignty, "a strength of community nutrition is its ability to educate the public about issues related to nutrition and health."<sup>44</sup> These include problems with deskilling and the growing gap between what people need to know about healthy food choices and the information available to them. She puts forward some examples of how community nutrition contributes to food sovereignty, including "research on the health impacts of access to and control over traditional lands for Indigenous peoples,"<sup>45</sup> while noting the need for more research in areas like genetically modified organisms. In terms of food sovereignty in practice, Engler-Stringer discusses several current initiatives, such as community kitchens, collective kitchens, food hubs, farmers' markets and urban agriculture. By integrating food sovereignty principles into community nutrition practice and research, she concludes that "the focus of our field will expand to include the systemic factors that lead to many of the nutritional health disparities we currently encounter."<sup>46</sup>

The connections between food sovereignty and community gardens are carefully explored by Yolanda Hansen, who argues that, given their positive social, environmental, and political goals, community gardens can be

42. Rachel Engler-Stringer, "Community Nutrition Practice and Research: Integrating a Food Sovereignty Approach," in Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe, eds., *Food Sovereignty in Canada*, 134.

43. Engler-Stringer, "Community Nutrition," 135.

44. Engler-Stringer, "Community Nutrition," 140.

45. Engler-Stringer, "Community Nutrition," 141.

46. Engler-Stringer, "Community Nutrition," 147.

understood as a local practice of food sovereignty. Using three community gardens in Saskatchewan as case studies, she finds that

these urban spaces reconnect people to their sources of food and the natural environment, offer an empowering space for community building and participatory decision making, and spark personal politicization as a place of resistance to an industrialized and globalized food system.<sup>47</sup>

To contextualize her argument, she outlines a history of community gardening, beginning with the British allotment gardens over the past two hundred years and the first community gardens in Saskatchewan in the early part of the twentieth century. Both world wars and the Great Depression sparked greater engagement in community gardening, as did the environmental and urban green space movement of the 1970s and 1980s. All of these examples, she maintains, point to practices that were born out of periods of crisis and encouraged a set of values for overcoming these crises, such as patriotism, self-help, co-operation, and sharing. She adds that the current food crisis is “yet another impetus for greater local food provisioning, including community gardens.”<sup>48</sup> Hansen concludes that community gardens “fit well within the food sovereignty framework of active participation, control over the food system and the right to produce,”<sup>49</sup> and thus have the potential to be a strong player in the Canadian food sovereignty movement, particularly with respect to urban areas.

Friedmann then moves the discussion to Ontario and outlines food sovereignty in the Golden Horseshoe – the continuous urbanized region around the western part of Lake Ontario. She begins by asking what food sovereignty means for a largely urban area, noting that the question points to the importance of “the relations between countryside and city, and between farmers and urban dwellers.”<sup>50</sup> Emphasizing that the path to food sovereignty in this region is complex, she outlines two main problems. First, the sustainable mixed farming associated with food sovereignty faces multiple obstacles, including loss of farmland, low farmer incomes, mismatch between crops grown and crops appropriate for an urban market, and the political clout of industrial farmers. Second, although many non-farmers support food sovereignty, a good number of them have little contact with farming or farmers. In spite of these challenges, Friedmann believes that “renewing food and farming depends on bringing people of all kinds – eaters, growers and everyone in between – into

47. Yolanda Hansen, “Growing Community: Community Gardens as a Local Practice of Food Sovereignty,” in Wittman Desmarais, and Wiebe, eds., *Food Sovereignty in Canada*, 151–2.

48. Hansen, “Growing Community,” 154.

49. Hansen, “Growing Community,” 163.

50. Harriet Friedmann, “Food Sovereignty in the Golden Horseshoe Region of Ontario.” in Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe, eds., *Food Sovereignty in Canada*, 169.

new and increasingly conscious relationships with each other and with land.”<sup>51</sup> These relationships need to renew agriculture, find a new policy hinge (e.g., health), base green economic renewal on agri-food, promote food literacy and skills through education, and rebuild regional infrastructure. After describing a number of initiatives that are building new and increasingly conscious relationships, she ends on an optimistic note, suggesting that a community of food practice has emerged.

Hannah Whitman and Herb Barbolet end the book by taking us to the west coast of Canada to examine the potential for food sovereignty in British Columbia, the most diverse agricultural landscape in the country. Although BC’s Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), the growing number of small organic farms, and a variety of local food initiatives form a commendable basis for food sovereignty in the province, they argue that small-scale farmers and local food systems are struggling in a neoliberal food regime. Within this neoliberal context, the authors propose that it is crucial to study the role of community groups and social movements, including their resistance to agricultural concentration and ‘neo-regulation’ and their establishment of alternatives to the neoliberal food regime. Whittman and Barbolet point out that civil society organizations and social movements are working to support local food systems: producers have successfully lobbied the provincial government for changes to meat inspection regulations; organic grower and land co-operatives link producers and consumers through food networks; civil society movements are connecting sustainable agriculture and community nutrition; and food policy is being developed through such organizations as the Vancouver Food Policy Council and its Vancouver Food Charter. These initiatives are hopeful, but they are lined up against a neoliberal food regime that “discounts the value and possibility of local production.”<sup>52</sup> The book concludes with a set of six policy recommendations for developing an inclusive Canadian agricultural policy based on food sovereignty: participation of farm women, participatory policy development process, farmer participation in the definition of policy goals, ensuring fair compensation for production and labour, redistributing power and control, and environmental stewardship.

Overall, this groundbreaking book has opened new territory in food studies by applying food sovereignty to a developed country, thereby highlighting the robustness of the concept and the reach of its applicability. This, in turn, makes food sovereignty a worthy and workable alternative to the neoliberal vision of food as simply a commodity to be sold for a profit in the global market.

51. Friedman, “Food Sovereignty in the Golden Horseshoe,” 174.

52. Whittman and Barbolet, “‘Super, Natural,’” 206.

## Foodopoly

UNLIKE THE TWO PREVIOUS BOOKS, *Foodopoly: The Battle over the Future of Food and Farming in America* is a single-author publication written for a popular audience. Nonetheless, it makes a significant contribution to food studies through Wenonah Hauter's historical overview of the dysfunctional American food system, which she carries out in order to provide readers with the knowledge to fix it. Foodopoly for Hauter means the small number of corporations that control the food system from field to fork. She argues that the current food system is in crisis for three reasons: deregulation, consolidation, and control of the food supply by a few powerful corporations. Solving the crisis entails moving "beyond the focus on consumer choice to examine the corporate, scientific, industrial, and political structures that support an unhealthy food system."<sup>53</sup>

Contrasting the competitive rhetoric of the free market with actual policies that enable a small group of companies to control all aspects of the food system, Hauter points out that twenty food corporations produce the majority of food consumed by Americans, including organic brands. In addition, she maintains that science is out of control because the biotechnology industry is so powerful that it can simply buy public policy. Those aiming to establish an alternative food system often overlook these structural flaws, she observes, along with the problems associated with getting food from farms to consumers: lack of local markets for many farmers, nonexistent distribution channels, and missing infrastructure.

Hauter proposes that mid-size farms can be changed to produce sustainably grown organic food for the long term. While often far from markets, they have the capacity to produce enough food for the country if farm policy was changed. Those changes would address major structural problems, "from the failure to enforce antitrust laws and regulate genetically modified food to the manipulation of nutrition standards and the marketing of junk food to children."<sup>54</sup> The changes would include rural development, not only so rural communities would no longer see the wealth they create from agriculture "sucked into the bottom lines of the largest food corporations in the world,"<sup>55</sup> but also in order that farmers could make a living as well as provide healthy food for everyone. Hauter wants to seize the opportunity to move the food system away from factory farms and laboratories and toward ecological and economic soundness. To do so, she advocates for a wholesale effort to restructure how food is grown, sold, and distributed. Such restructuring would necessitate a massive grassroots movement to carry out two objectives: "challenge the multinational

53. Wenonah Hauter, *Foodopoly: The Battle over the Future of Food and Farming in America*, (New York: The New Press, 2012), 2.

54. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 6.

55. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 5.

corporations that profit from holding consumers and farmers hostage and, more important, to hold our elected officials accountable for the policies that are making us sick and fat.”<sup>56</sup>

Using a wide range of sources, peppered with pithy statements such as “Big Business thinks of our kitchens and stomachs as profit centers,”<sup>57</sup> Hauter works through the history of the dysfunctional American food system, beginning with the end of World War II when some of the current farm and food policies were first proposed. She examines the consolidation of the food chain into fewer and fewer hands, kickstarted by the Reagan administration’s dismantling of the system of regulations that had been built up to ensure fair and competitive markets – one of the early salvos of neoliberalism. This includes what she describes as the junk food pushers – corporations that specialize in bombarding the public with an endless number of heavily advertised “edible food-like substances”<sup>58</sup> high in salt, sugar, and fat, in spite of the fact that it is well documented that “the key to health is a low-fat diet that is rich in fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes.”<sup>59</sup> Noting that Americans spend about 90 percent of their food budgets on processed food, she refers to the consolidation question as “Walmarting the food chain.” Walmart is the largest food retailer in the US, with a business model that “is all about sucking money out of the supply chain”<sup>60</sup> – that is, downloading costs and responsibilities to its suppliers. And since Walmart is the biggest purchaser of American agricultural products, she argues that it wields a considerable amount of influence over which foods are available, how they are produced, and the prices paid to those who produce them.

One eye-opening section deals with organic food, considered by many to be the more sustainable choice in an unsustainable food system. Overall, she contends, organic products mirror the consolidation and corporate control that are characteristic of conventional foods. Many large multinationals have acquired organic labels or developed their own. At the same time, they are lobbying hard to weaken existing organic standards to make it easier (and cheaper) to corner the price premium associated with organic food. The result, she points out, is a paradox: “Organic food, catapulted into popularity as an alternative to a corporate-controlled food system, is now largely controlled by the largest food companies in the world.”<sup>61</sup>

A number of other food issues come under Hauter’s scrutiny. For example, she outlines how food safety is also compromised in this dysfunctional food

56. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 6–7.

57. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 11.

58. Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 1.

59. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 48.

60. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 70.

61. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 101.

system as the powerful meat industry pushes for deregulation of food safety and lobbies for the right to use unsafe chemicals and drugs in animal production. In addition, she examines factory farming in depth, noting the loss of small and medium-sized livestock farms and the consolidation of the meat industry, with the largest meat processors operating as *de facto* monopolies.

One of the most frightening sections deals with corporate control of the gene pool, which Hauter refers to as “the theft of life.”<sup>62</sup> Using taxpayers’ money, so-called “life science” companies have gained control over the building blocks of life, which she argues threatens the integrity of the gene pool and collective food security. She advocates the use of science for social benefit rather than corporate bottom lines, while calling for a return to the selective breeding programs refined by farmers for centuries and the labelling and regulation of genetically engineered food. In a warning about the biotechnology of the future – artificial life, nano-scale particles, cloning and test-tube meat – she asks,

Is the antidote for overweight Americans really no-calorie junk food with artificial nutrients – all processed, flavored, texturized, colored, and stored in containers produced through the use of nano particles that can cross the blood-brain barrier and are unregulated and untested?<sup>63</sup>

While the social movement that has coalesced around food is a positive beginning, Hauter believes that the next step should be “politicizing food activists to engage in changing the federal farm and food policies that have resulted in the dysfunctional food system.”<sup>64</sup> She proposes that achieving a food system that benefits all Americans will need a suite of policy changes, including enforcing antitrust laws and regulating the advertising of junk food to children. Local food initiatives may be valuable, but building an alternative food system that meets the needs of the country will take fundamental structural changes. Food activists must organize themselves for political change and “build the political power to take back our democracy and our food system.”<sup>65</sup> If not, she worries that nascent local food systems will end up like our current food system, particularly because geography alone does not guarantee a fair, affordable, democratic, and green food system. For Hauter, the way forward includes realizing that we cannot shop our way into a sustainable food system, demanding a functional market, tackling future farm bills, developing rural economies, increasing access to healthy food, practising organic agriculture and environmental stewardship, ending gene tinkering, busting the trade myth, producing safe and drug-free food, getting tough on advertising, pursuing legal remedies, creating a new paradigm – the global commons, – and

62. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 227.

63. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 276.

64. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 277.

65. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 282.

building political power.

*Foodopoly* more than fulfils Hauter's goal of creating "the road map for changing the way we eat."<sup>66</sup> The knowledge she amasses in this book will introduce readers to the main issues plaguing the dysfunctional American food system and encourage them toward activism. While some of it is not applicable to Canada (for example, the Farm Bill and antitrust laws), much of it is, given that the two countries share the dubious distinction of being the global showcase for the Western diet: "lots of processed foods and meat, lots of added fat and sugar, lots of everything – except vegetables, fruits, and whole grains."<sup>67</sup>

Overall, the three books in this review essay measure fully up to Hauter's contention that "Food – basic to the human experience, culture, and health – provides an opening to redefining how the world is viewed"<sup>68</sup> All three books leverage food issues to analyze current problems and envision a more sustainable future. By doing so, they make a substantial contribution to food studies, adding breadth and depth to an emerging field that defines itself in terms of its critical perspective. In addition to redefining how the world is viewed, they also reinforce the understanding of food studies as constituting a new movement, not only as an academic (inter)discipline but also as a means to change society.<sup>69</sup>

66. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 2.

67. Pollan, *In Defense of Food*, 10.

68. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 307.

69. Jennifer Berg, Marion Nestle, and Amy Bentley, "Food Studies," in S.H. Katz and W.W. Weaver, eds., *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*, Vol. 2, (New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 2003).